SŪRAH 40

Ghāfir

(The Forgiver)

Prologue

This *sūrah* deals with the major issues of truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith, the message and those who reject it, as well as unjustifiable tyranny and how God smites tyrants who seek to impose their will on others. It also refers to the position of believers who follow Divine guidance and obey God's commandments. It mentions how the angels pray that they may be forgiven their sins, and how God answers their prayers. It also speaks about the reward awaiting them in the life to come.

Such being its subject matter, the whole atmosphere of the *sūrah* is one of a battle, the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and tyranny. This is interspersed with an air of grace and mercy whenever the believers are mentioned. The general atmosphere is generated through a description of how earlier communities were destroyed as a result of their opposition to Divine faith, as well as several images of the Day of Judgement. All in all, these awesome images suit the sombre air of the *sūrah*.

Fittingly, the opening of the *sūrah* uses shôrt phrases that carry a distinctive beat: '*who forgives sins; accepts repentance; is severe in retribution; limitless in bounty; there is no deity other than Him; to Him is the ultimate return.*' (Verse 3) These phrases sound like hammers

striking in unison, with harmony between meaning and rhythm. Note also that words like 'might' and 'power' are frequently used in the *sūrah*.

As a whole, the *sūrah* has a powerful effect on us, portraying as it does scenes of the Day of Judgement and images of the fate of earlier communities. At times, it softens its rhythm so as to gently touch our hearts, showing us images of the angels who carry God's throne, as well as those around it, praying to God to bestow His grace on His devoted servants. The same may be said regarding the verses that refer to universal scenes or to the finer elements of the human soul, as both provide evidence in support of the truth of faith. Here, then, are some examples of the verses that generate these feelings:

1. In reference to earlier communities and their fate: "*Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment!*" (Verse 5) "*Have they, then, never travelled through the land and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before them? Greater were they in power than they are, and in the impact which they left on earth. God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God. That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is powerful, stern in retribution.*" (Verses 21–22)
2. In reference to the Day of Resurrection: "*Warn them of the Day that is ever drawing near, when people's hearts will chokingly come up to the throats. The wrongdoers will have neither intimate friend nor intercessor to be heeded.*" (Verse 18) "*Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers. They will certainly come to know when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell.*" (Verses 69–72)

3. A softer touch is provided in the scene of those who carry God's throne, devoted as they are in humble prayer: "*Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers: Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the suffering in the blazing fire. And, our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise. Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.*'" (Verses 7–9)
4. Inspirational touches are achieved in the portrayals of miraculous phenomena in the universe and within the human soul: "*It is He who creates you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass; and then He brings you forth as infants. He then lets you reach maturity, and then grow old – although some of you die earlier. [All this He ordains] so that you may reach your appointed term, and you may use your reason. It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is.*" (Verses 67–68) "*It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see. God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks. Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be?*" (Verses 61–62) "*It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy. He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things. Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 64)

In all these images there is evident harmony and consistency, the whole ambience perfectly fitting the *sūrah*'s subject matter.

The *sūrah* may be divided into four parts. The first begins with two separate letters: "Ḥā. Mīm. *The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing.*" (Verses 1–2) This is followed by the short

phrases with their distinctive beat, to which we referred earlier. The *sūrah* then states that the whole universe submits to God and obeys Him. Only the unbelievers dispute God's revelations, thus they separate themselves from the rest of the universe. Therefore, the Prophet should pay no attention to them, no matter how affluent and well pleased they appear to be. They will inevitably face the same fate suffered by earlier communities of unbelievers. God smote them with a stern punishment. Nevertheless, more suffering awaits them in the life to come. By contrast, the angels carrying God's throne, as well as those surrounding it, declare their belief in their Lord, address their worship to Him alone, and pray for the forgiveness of the believers among the dwellers of the earth, as well as for their success and prosperity.

At the same time, the *sūrah* gives an image of the unbelievers when the entire universe, which believes in God, calls out to them on the Day of Resurrection, saying: *"Indeed, greater than your present loathing of yourselves is God's loathing of you when you were called to the faith and you rejected it."* (Verse 10) In their position of humiliation, which contrasts with their arrogance in this present life, they admit their faults and acknowledge their Lord, but such realization is now of no use to them. They are only reminded of what they used to do when they associated partners with God and arrogantly turned from His guidance.

This image of the hereafter is followed by one presenting people's situation in this present life: "*He it is who shows you His signs and sends down sustenance from the sky for you.*" (Verse 13) They are so reminded in order that they may turn to their Lord and declare their belief in Him as the only God: "*Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 14) The *sūrah* then adds a strong warning of that fearful day, and follows this with an image of how they stand on that day: "*the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God.*" (Verse 16) Those who are arrogant, tyrannical or disputant will all disappear into insignificance: "*With whom does sovereignty rest today? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists.*" (Verse 16) The *sūrah* goes on to give further images of that day when judgement over all belongs to God alone. All those worshipped instead or alongside Him are nowhere to be seen.

The second part begins with a reference to the fate suffered by some past communities. This serves as a prelude to the narration about certain events from Moses' life history and specifically his encounter with Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah or Qārūn. These events, representing tyrants' attitude to the message of truth, are only told in this *sūrah*. There is no reference to them anywhere else in the Qur'ān. They tell us of a believer from Pharaoh's own household, who concealed the fact that he believed in Moses' message. He tries first to protect Moses against Pharaoh's attempt to kill him. He states the word of truth, putting it cautiously at first, then ultimately declaring it openly and clearly. In his argument with Pharaoh, this believer presents strong and clear evidence for the truth, warns Pharaoh and his people of the Day of Judgement, describes some images of the day in an inspirational way and reminds them of their attitude and that of generations before them to Joseph and his message. The story is developed in such a way as to link it, eventually, to the life to come, and we see them all there, disputing among themselves as they suffer in hell. The dialogue occurs between the weak elements of society and their arrogant leaders, on the one side, and another takes place between them all and the angels in charge of hell, trying to find a way out when there is none. In the light of this last scene, the *sūrah* directs the Prophet Muḥammad to remain patient in adversity, to have full trust that God's promise will come true, and to glorify and praise Him.

The third part starts with a statement that those who dispute God's revelations without providing any sound argument in support of what they say are only motivated by a quest for greatness. Yet they are too insignificant to attain this. The *sūrah* then directs people's hearts to reflect on the great universe God has created, which is far greater than all mankind. This reminder may perhaps make those who are arrogant better appreciate the greatness of God's creation, rather than remaining blind to it: "*The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand.*" (Verse 57) It reminds them of the approach of the Last Hour and directs them to pray to God, for He responds to those who pray to Him.

Those who choose to remain arrogant will inevitably enter hell in complete humiliation. Here the *sūrah* portrays some of the universal signs that they ignore. We see the night portrayed as a time for rest and

the day is given eyes, while the earth is shown as a resting place and the sky a canopy. In relation to themselves, the *sūrah* also reminds them to reflect on the pleasing shape and form God has given them. It directs them to submit to God with sincerity. It instructs the Prophet to distance himself from what they worship, declare God's order to him to reject their deities and to submit to the Lord of all the worlds. It seeks to make their hearts more responsive by mentioning that God, the Creator of the universe, is the One who originated them from dust first, then from a gamete. It is He who gives life and deals death. Again the *sūrah* makes the Prophet wonder at those who argue about God, warning them against punishment in the hereafter, and portrays a very powerful image of such punishment: "*They will certainly come to know when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell.*" (Verses 70–72) Indeed, those whom they worshipped will disown their worship, while they themselves deny having ever worshipped anyone. Ultimately, they end up in hell, as they are told: "*Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.*" (Verse 76) Again, in the light of this scene the Prophet is instructed to remain patient in adversity, and to trust in the fulfilment of God's promise, whether he remains alive to see some of what this promise involves or he is made to die before its fulfilment. The promise will come true at the time appointed for it.

The *sūrah*'s fourth and final part is closely linked with its third. As the Prophet is directed to wait patiently, he is told that God sent many messengers before him: "*No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave.*" (Verse 78) Still, there are many signs in the universe, and there are also plenty of signs that people ignore. Who, for example made cattle subservient to man? Furthermore, the ships that carry them on the sea are a sign they see with their eyes. The fate of past communities should also serve as an admonition to them. The *sūrah* then concludes with a powerful image coupled with strong rhythm, showing a community of unbelievers faced with God's might. They declared their belief, but it was too late: "*But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost.*" (Verse 85) This is a fitting ending, one that depicts the fate of those who are arrogant.

I

A Prayer by Angels

Ghāfir (The Forgiver)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حمٓ ﴿١﴾

The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, (2)

تَنزِيلُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْعَلِيمِ ﴿٢﴾

who forgives sins, accepts repentance, is severe in retribution and limitless in bounty. There is no deity other than Him. To Him is the ultimate return. (3)

غَافِرِ ٱلذَّنۢبِ وَقَابِلِ ٱلتَّوْبِ شَدِيدِ ٱلْعِقَابِ ذِى ٱلطَّوْلِ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ إِلَيْهِ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٣﴾

None but the unbelievers dispute God's revelations. Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth. (4)

مَا يُجَٰدِلُ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ فَلَا يَغْرُرْكَ تَقَلُّبُهُمْ فِى ٱلْبِلَٰدِ ﴿٤﴾

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ
وَالْأَحْزَابُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ ۖ وَهَمَّتْ
كُلُّ أُمَّةٍ بِرَسُولِهِمْ لِيَأْخُذُوهُ
وَجَادَلُوا بِالْبَاطِلِ لِيُدْحِضُوا
بِهِ الْحَقَّ فَأَخَذْتُهُمْ ۖ فَكَيْفَ كَانَ
عِقَابِ ﴿٥﴾

Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment! (5)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ حَقَّتْ كَلِمَتُ رَبِّكَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ
كَفَرُوا أَنَّهُمْ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ ﴿٦﴾

Thus your Lord's word shall come true against the unbelievers: they will be the dwellers in the fire of hell. (6)

الَّذِينَ يَحْمِلُونَ الْعَرْشَ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهُ
يُسَبِّحُونَ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَيُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ
وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا رَبَّنَا
وَسِعْتَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ رَحْمَةً وَعِلْمًا
فَاغْفِرْ لِلَّذِينَ تَابُوا وَاتَّبَعُوا سَبِيلَكَ
وَقِهِمْ عَذَابَ الْجَحِيمِ ﴿٧﴾

Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers: 'Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the suffering in the blazing fire. (7)

رَبَّنَا وَأَدْخِلْهُمْ جَنَّٰتِ عَدْنٍ ٱلَّتِى
وَعَدتَّهُمْ وَمَن صَلَحَ مِنْ
ءَابَآئِهِمْ وَأَزْوَٰجِهِمْ وَذُرِّيَّٰتِهِمْ ۚ
إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٨﴾

'And, our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise. (8)

وَقِهِمُ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ ۚ وَمَن تَقِ
ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ يَوْمَئِذٍ فَقَدْ رَحِمْتَهُۥ ۚ
وَذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

'Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.' (9)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ يُنَادَوْنَ
لَمَقْتُ ٱللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ مِن مَّقْتِكُمْ
أَنفُسَكُمْ إِذْ تُدْعَوْنَ إِلَى
ٱلْإِيمَٰنِ فَتَكْفُرُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

The unbelievers will be addressed: 'Indeed, greater than your present loathing of yourselves is God's loathing of you when you were called to the faith and you rejected it.' (10)

قَالُوا۟ رَبَّنَآ أَمَتَّنَا ٱثْنَتَيْنِ وَأَحْيَيْتَنَا ٱثْنَتَيْنِ
فَٱعْتَرَفْنَا بِذُنُوبِنَا فَهَلْ إِلَىٰ خُرُوجٍ
مِّن سَبِيلٍ ﴿١١﴾

They will say: 'Our Lord! Twice have You caused us to die, just as twice You have brought us to life! Now that we have recognized our sins, is there any way out?' (11)

ذَٰلِكُم بِأَنَّهُۥٓ إِذَا دُعِىَ ٱللَّهُ وَحْدَهُۥ
كَفَرْتُمْ ۖ وَإِن يُشْرَكْ بِهِۦ تُؤْمِنُوا۟ ۚ
فَٱلْحُكْمُ لِلَّهِ ٱلْعَلِىِّ ٱلْكَبِيرِ ﴿١٢﴾

[They will be told]: 'This is all because when God alone was invoked, you denied this truth; whereas, when partners were associated with Him, you believed in them! All judgement rests with God, the Exalted, the Supreme One.' (12)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُرِيكُمْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ وَيُنَزِّلُ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ رِزْقًا ۚ وَمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ إِلَّا مَن يُنِيبُ ﴿١٣﴾

He it is who shows you His signs and sends down sustenance from the sky for you. Yet only those who turn to God will take heed. (13)

فَٱدْعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. (14)

رَفِيعُ ٱلدَّرَجَٰتِ ذُو ٱلْعَرْشِ يُلْقِى ٱلرُّوحَ مِنْ أَمْرِهِۦ عَلَىٰ مَن يَشَآءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦ لِيُنذِرَ يَوْمَ ٱلتَّلَاقِ ﴿١٥﴾

High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne. By His own will does He bestow revelation on whomever He wills of His servants, so as to warn of the Day when all shall meet Him; (15)

يَوْمَ هُم بَٰرِزُونَ ۖ لَا يَخْفَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ مِنْهُمْ شَىْءٌ ۚ لِّمَنِ ٱلْمُلْكُ ٱلْيَوْمَ ۖ لِلَّهِ ٱلْوَٰحِدِ ٱلْقَهَّارِ ﴿١٦﴾

the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God. With whom does sovereignty rest today? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists. (16)

ٱلْيَوْمَ تُجْزَىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍۭ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ ۚ لَا ظُلْمَ ٱلْيَوْمَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَرِيعُ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿١٧﴾

This day each soul will be requited for what it has earned: no injustice will be done today. God is swift in reckoning. (17)

وَأَنذِرْهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْآزِفَةِ إِذِ ٱلْقُلُوبُ لَدَى
ٱلْحَنَاجِرِ كَٰظِمِينَ ۚ مَا لِلظَّٰلِمِينَ مِنْ
حَمِيمٍ وَلَا شَفِيعٍ يُطَاعُ ﴿١٨﴾

Warn them of the Day that is ever drawing near, when people's hearts will chokingly come up to the throats. The wrongdoers will have neither intimate friend nor intercessor to be heeded. (18)

يَعْلَمُ خَآئِنَةَ ٱلْأَعْيُنِ وَمَا تُخْفِى
ٱلصُّدُورُ ﴿١٩﴾

God is well aware of the most stealthy glance, and of everything the heart would conceal. (19)

وَٱللَّهُ يَقْضِى بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ
مِن دُونِهِۦ لَا يَقْضُونَ بِشَىْءٍ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْبَصِيرُ ﴿٢٠﴾

God will judge in accordance with truth and justice, whereas those whom they invoke beside Him cannot judge at all. God alone hears all and sees all. (20)

Clear Outline

> Ḥā. Mīm. *The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, who forgives sins, accepts repentance, is severe in retribution and limitless in bounty. There is no deity other than Him. To Him is the ultimate return.* (Verses 1–3)

This is the first of seven *sūrahs* that all begin with the two separate letters, *Ḥā Mīm*. In one of these seven *sūrahs* three other separate letters, *'Ayn Sīn Qāf*, are added after the initial two. We have already discussed why some *sūrahs* start with these separate letters, thereby indicating that the Qur'ān, which defies imitation, is composed of such letters which the Arabs used every day, orally and in writing, in their language.

This is followed by a statement of a fact that is frequently used in Makkan *sūrahs* given these seek to establish faith: the fact of revelation: "*The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing.*" (Verse 2) A number of God's attributes are then stated. These are directly relevant to the subject matter of the *sūrah* and the issues it discusses:

"*the Almighty, the All-Knowing, who forgives sins, accepts repentance, is severe in retribution and limitless in bounty. There is no deity other than Him. To Him is the ultimate return.*" (Verses 2–3) In fact all the issues the *sūrah* raises relate to these attributes of God, powerfully stated at the outset to give an impression that they are well and firmly established.

Limitless in His glory, God outlines to His servants these of His attributes that have a profound effect on their lives. Thus, He raises their hopes and fears, making them feel that they are within His grasp and can never elude what He wills. The attributes highlighted here are:

The Almighty: He is overpowering. No one can get the better of Him, while He has power over all things. When He decides something, nothing can stop this from occurring.

The All-Knowing: He conducts all affairs on the basis of perfect knowledge. Nothing is hidden from Him.

He forgives sins: He grants His forgiveness on the basis of His knowledge about those servants who deserve to be forgiven.

He accepts repentance: When sinners repent, He accepts their repentance and bestows His grace on them, opening the door for them to address Him directly.

He is severe in retribution: He punishes the arrogant who are hardened in sin, unwilling to show regret or seek forgiveness.

Limitless in bounty: He bestows His limitless grace, multiplies the reward for good deeds and gives without reckoning.

There is no deity other than Him: He alone is the Godhead who has no partners or equals.

To Him is the ultimate return: None can evade meeting Him or escape accountability.

These attributes provide a clear outline of the interrelation between Him and His servants. They should be clear in their feelings, thoughts and understanding of how to deal with Him. Then, they will have no ambiguity about what pleases Him or incurs His anger.

In the past, those who held beliefs based on legends were at a loss in knowing how to deal with their deities, because they had no clear idea of what pleased or angered them. They pictured them as impulsive, having no clear aim or purpose, demonstrating violent reactions and causing people much worry and confusion. They resorted to charms and sacrifices in their attempts to please such deities, but could only guess about whether they were satisfied or not. By contrast, Islam provides a very clear concept, establishing a relationship between people and their true Lord, outlining His attributes, defining His will, and instructing them on how to draw closer to Him, fear His punishment and pray for His mercy, always following a straight and clear path.

The Same Old Battle

> *None but the unbelievers dispute God's revelations. Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth. Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment! Thus your Lord's word shall come true against the unbelievers: they will be the dwellers in the fire of hell.* (Verses 4–6)

Having established the truth of God's oneness and His Divine attributes, the *sūrah* makes clear that this truth is accepted by all creatures. It is, in fact, firmly rooted in their nature and directly related to the nature of the universe. All creation is entirely convinced by the signs testifying to God's oneness. Only the unbelievers dispute these signs and argue about God's revelations. Thus they are a class apart, choosing to be at odds with the universe and all other creatures within it.

"*None but the unbelievers dispute God's revelations.*" (Verse 4) Throughout the entire expanse of the universe, only the unbelievers stand apart, deviating from the true path. In relation to the whole universe, they are weaker and less significant than an ant in relation to planet earth. When they stand on their own disputing God's revelations and denying His signs, the rest of the universe declares its acceptance of Him and recognizes His oneness, deriving its strength from Him. With their odd attitude, the unbelievers' fate is sealed, no matter how powerful, affluent and mighty they may appear to be: "*Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth.*" (Verse 4) They may be able to move about, gather wealth, enjoy their power and revel in easy living. However, they are ultimately doomed. The battle, if there could ever be a battle between them and the Creator of the universe, will lead to its inevitable end.

There were in former times communities that followed the same path. Their fate should make clear to the unbelievers what happens in the end to anyone who tries to stand against the power of the Almighty: "*Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment!*" (Verse 5) It is the same old story, beginning with the Prophet Noah. In other words, the battle remains the same throughout all generations. This verse provides an overall picture: a message from God received with rejection and tyranny, which leads to the inevitable end. Every messenger is met by those in power in his community who do not try to justify their stance with sound argument. On the contrary, they resort to tyranny and try to do away with God's messenger. They also resort to trickery in order to deceive the masses and claim victory for themselves. Therefore, God's power intervenes and smashes them in the most amazing way: "*How awesome was My punishment!*" (Verse 5) The punishments meted out were indeed severe, leaving in their wake ruins that testify to the same. Furthermore, all this is recorded in human history.

The battle, however, is not over yet. There is a further episode in the life to come: "*Thus your Lord's word shall come true against the*

unbelievers: they will be the dwellers in the fire of hell." (Verse 6) When God's word applies to someone, it always comes true. There can be no argument about this.

Thus does the Qur'ān describe the true nature of the battle between faith and unfaith, truth and falsehood, those who advocate God's oneness and those who, against all right, behave arrogantly on earth. We then realize that this is an old and on-going battle that started at the dawn of human life. The battlefield is wider than the whole earth because the universe and all that exists in it believe in God and submit to Him. The only exceptions are those who dispute God's revelations. The two sides are far from equal: on the side of truth stand an endless line, while on the side of falsehood only a small band stands, weak and powerless even though it may appear to be able to do as it likes on earth and to possess power and authority.

The Qur'ān describes the nature of the battle so that advocates of the truth, in all generations, are reassured. They should never be deceived by the apparent might enjoyed by the forces of falsehood at any particular time, or by the outcome of a single round in the battle. Such instances after all do not reflect the complete truth. The truth is that which is described in God's book, in His own words. He is the most truthful of all speakers, and He is the Almighty, the All-Knowing.

A Universal Bond

A relevant point is that even the angels carrying God's throne and those surrounding it, who rank among the forces of faith in the universe, remember the believers among human beings, mention them in God's presence and pray for their forgiveness. They also pray to Him for the fulfilment of His promise to those believers with whom the angels share their bond of faith:

> *Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers: 'Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the*

suffering in the blazing fire. And, our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise. Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.' (Verses 7–9)

We do not know what this throne is: we have no image of it. Nor do we know how those assigned to carry it do so or how the others are present around it. It is futile to try to determine something which is beyond the reach of human understanding or perception. No purpose can be served by arguing about something over which God has not provided information. All that can be said concerning this fact is that there are some creatures who are close to God, and these '*extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him.*' Although the fact that they are believers can be taken for granted, this is specifically mentioned in the Qur'ān to emphasize the bond between them and human believers. Having extolled God's limitless glory, these servants of God pray for the believers among humanity, requesting the best that one believer can ask for another.

They begin their supplication in a very polite way, in the process teaching us how to couch our own prayers. They say: "*Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge.*" (Verse 7) As they address God, they make clear their request that God bestows His grace on people, that they are relying on the fact that His grace embraces all, and that His knowledge encompasses everything. Thus, they do not make any assumptions; they simply refer to God's grace and knowledge. "*Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the suffering in the blazing fire.*" (Verse 7) This reference to God's forgiveness and people's repentance corresponds to the opening of the *sūrah* where God is described as the One who forgives sins and accepts repentance. Likewise, the reference to the '*suffering in the blazing fire*' corresponds to the earlier description of His retribution as being severe.

These servants of God continue with their supplications, praying now for the admission of believers among human beings into heaven,

in fulfilment of His promise to His good servants: "*Our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 8) Admission into heaven is a great triumph and means a life of bliss. When there is added to this the company of righteous ancestors, spouses and offspring, another dimension of bliss is thus granted. Moreover, this is an aspect of the unity of all believers. It is in the bond of faith that fathers, spouses and offspring are united. Without it, all their ties are severed. This part of their supplication highlights God's attributes of power and wisdom. It is this combination that determines how people are judged.

The supplication continues: "*Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.*" (Verse 9) Having prayed for their admission to heaven, this prayer refers to the most important point in the whole difficult process. It is evil deeds that ruin people and lead them to their doom. When God shields a believer from evil, He actually shields that believer from the consequences of such evil. This is the great mercy on the Day of Judgement, and it is only the first step to bliss and happiness. This shielding from evil is indeed the great triumph.

Hating Oneself

As the carriers of the throne and those surrounding it address their prayer to God appealing for His grace to be bestowed on believers, their brethren in faith, the unbelievers find themselves in a totally different capacity. Everyone is looking for support, but none is to be found. In fact all bonds with all beings and things in the universe are severed. They are called out so that they can listen to the rebuke coming from all directions. The arrogance they demonstrated in this life is turned now into humiliation. They want to place their hopes in someone, but none is available to encourage their hopes:

> *The unbelievers will be addressed: 'Indeed, greater than your present loathing of yourselves is God's loathing of you when you were called to the faith and you rejected it.' They will say: 'Our Lord! Twice*

> *have You caused us to die, just as twice You have brought us to life! Now that we have recognized our sins, is there any way out?' [They will be told]: 'This is all because when God alone was invoked, you denied this truth; whereas, when partners were associated with Him, you believed in them! All judgement rests with God, the Exalted, the Supreme One.'* (Verses 10–12)

The Arabic text uses the strongest word for hate. We see them addressed from all corners and told that God's loathing of them when they were called upon to believe and still rejected the faith is far stronger than their feelings of hate towards themselves as they realize to what end they have brought themselves. They realize how different their fate could have been, had they responded to the call to faith before it was too late. This reminder is exceptionally painful for them in their newly difficult situation.

Now that all delusion is gone, they realize that the only One to turn to is God Himself; and so they do: "*They will say: Our Lord! Twice have You caused us to die, just as twice You have brought us to life! Now that we have recognized our sins, is there any way out?*" (Verse 11) Their words betray their misery and despair. They call out: '*Our Lord!*' Yet they had once denied Him and rejected His message. You gave us life the first time when You breathed of Your spirit into what was dead and thus You gave it life and we became alive. Again You have given us life after we died. We are now turning to You because You are the only One who can save us from the misery we are in. We acknowledge our faults and admit our sins. Is there, then, a way out of this misery?

Their appeal betrays the direness of their situation. They are in bitter despair. They are made to see the reason for their plight: "*This is all because when God alone was invoked, you denied this truth; whereas, when partners were associated with Him, you believed in them! All judgement rests with God, the Exalted, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 12) This is what has brought you to your present position of humiliation. You denied God's oneness and attributed partners to Him. All judgement, then, rests with Him, the Exalted, the Supreme. Both attributes fit well with the position of judgement. He is Exalted above all things and Superior to all beings.

No Injustice

The *sūrah* now dwells on one of God's attributes that fits with His exalted position. The believers are instructed to address their prayers to Him, associating no partners with Him and to be sincere in their devotion to Him alone. The *sūrah* also refers to the fact of revelation so as to give a warning about the day when all mankind will be brought together for judgement, reward and punishment. On that day, all dominion and sovereignty belong to God alone:

> *He it is who shows you His signs and sends down sustenance from the sky for you. Yet only those who turn to God will take heed. Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne. By His own will does He bestow revelation on whomever He wills of His servants, so as to warn of the Day when all shall meet Him; the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God. With whom does sovereignty rest today? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists. This day each soul will be requited for what it has earned: no injustice will be done today. God is swift in reckoning.* (Verses 13–17)

"*He it is who shows you His signs.*" (Verse 13) God's signs are seen in everything in the universe: in the great bodies such as the sun and the planets, and also in the great phenomena such as the day and night, rain, thunder and lightning. Likewise, they are seen in minute things such as the atom, cell, leaf or flower. In each of these there is a miraculous sign which appears clearly when man tries to imitate it, let alone initiate it. Never can man fully imitate even the simplest little thing God has created.

And He it is who "*sends down sustenance from the sky for you.*" (Verse 13) Of all the sustenance God sends down people know best the rain, which is the origin of life on earth and the source of food and drink. Yet there is so much more than rain that God sends down and people learn about this gradually. Part of it consists of the rays that are necessary for life on earth. Such sustenance may also include the Divine messages

that have provided guidance for mankind ever since the early stages of human life on earth. They showed man the right way and provided sound codes for living.

"*Yet only those who turn to God will take heed.*" (Verse 13) It is the one who turns to God that remembers His grace as well as His signs and revelations which the unbelievers, with hardened hearts, prefer to ignore. In connection with turning to God, the believers are instructed to pray to God alone and to be sincere in their faith, paying little heed to what the unbelievers feel or say: "*Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 14) The unbelievers will never accept that the believers should hold on sincerely to their faith in God alone and their worship of none but Him. There is no way they will accept this, no matter how much the believers try to appease them. Therefore, the believers should stay their course, praying to God alone, completely sincere and devoted. They should pay no heed to whether the unbelievers are happy with them or not, because they will never be satisfied.

The *sūrah* adds at this point the following attributes of God: "*High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne. By His own will does He bestow revelation on whomever He wills of His servants.*" (Verse 15) It is God alone who is exalted in His position, high above all orders of being, the Lord of the Throne who controls everything. It is He who gives His orders, which give life to hearts and souls, to those whom He chooses from among His servants. This expression refers to the revelation of the Divine message, and it highlights here the fact that God's revelations bring life to humanity. It further states that revelation is bestowed from on high to those chosen elite among God's servants. All these facts are in harmony with God's attributes mentioned earlier in the *sūrah*, stating that He is "*the Exalted, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 12)

The main task undertaken by a servant of God chosen to receive such a message is to deliver a warning: "*so as to warn of the Day when all shall meet Him.*" (Verse 15) That is the day when people will meet together, and they will also stand face to face with the deeds they did during their lives on earth, and they will meet other creatures such as the *jinn*, the angels and other types of God's creation. All of them will

meet their Lord at the time of reckoning. Hence the day is described as 'the day of the meeting'. Furthermore, it is the day when they all stand without any cover to screen their reality. Hence, no one can put up a false image: "*the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God.*" (Verse 16) In fact, nothing about them is concealed from God at any time. However, at all times other than that day, they may imagine that they are covered or screened by something or other, or that what they do or say may remain secret. On that day, however, they will be truly exposed, unable to enjoy even an imaginary cover.

Therefore, on that day the arrogant and the mighty are made to face their humble reality. The whole universe stands in awe, and all creatures demonstrate their submission. Sovereignty belongs completely to God, the One who overpowers all. In fact this is true at all times. However, on that day, this fact becomes clear to all and sundry. Every tyrant of old and every conceited person will come to know and feel it. Then every sound dies down and every movement stops. A majestic voice asks a question and replies to it, as there is no one else to ask or reply: "*With whom does sovereignty rest today?*"... "*With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists.*" (Verse 16)

"*This day each soul will be requited for what it has earned: no injustice will be done today. God is swift in reckoning.*" (Verse 17) An air of awe, heightened by silence spreads. All creatures listen and realize; everything is settled, the reckoning is over. This is in harmony with what the *sūrah* said at the outset about those who dispute God's revelations: "*Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth.*" (Verse 4) This is the end of unjustified arrogance, tyranny and injustice, as well as of wealth and affluence.

The *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to warn his people about this day. The instruction is given against a backdrop of an image of the Day of Resurrection when God sits alone for judgement. Up till now the *sūrah* has not addressed people directly; instead it used a reporting style:

> *Warn them of the Day that is ever drawing near, when people's hearts will chokingly come up to the throats. The wrongdoers will have neither intimate friend nor intercessor to be heeded. God is*

> *well aware of the most stealthy glance, and of everything the heart would conceal. God will judge in accordance with truth and justice, whereas those whom they invoke beside Him cannot judge at all. God alone hears all and sees all.* (Verses 18–20)

The *sūrah* describes the Day of Judgement as ever drawing near, and we perceive it to be hastening towards us. Souls are in distress, pressing against people's throats. They try to suppress their worries and fears, and the effort is difficult. Nevertheless, they can find no one to support or protect them. No one can put up a word of intercession that finds response from anyone.

They stand in full view; nothing can conceal their reality. Even a stealthy glance and a heart's secret is brought into the open: "*God is well aware of the most stealthy glance, and of everything the heart would conceal.*" (Verse 19) An eye looking stealthily will try hard to conceal its stealthy gaze, but God is well aware of it. A secret may be hidden safely in one's soul, but it is not hidden from God who knows it all.

On that day, it is God only who passes judgement in fairness. Their alleged deities have nothing to do with such judgement: "*God will judge in accordance with truth and justice, whereas those whom they invoke beside Him cannot judge at all.*" (Verse 20) His judgement is based on perfect knowledge and full awareness. He will not entertain any injustice for anyone, and He forgets nothing: "*God alone hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 20)

2

A Believer in Pharaoh's House

أَوَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَيَنظُرُوا۟
كَيْفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَانُوا۟ مِن
قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ كَانُوا۟ هُمْ أَشَدَّ مِنْهُمْ قُوَّةً
وَءَاثَارًا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَأَخَذَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ
بِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَمَا كَانَ لَهُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ مِن
وَاقٍ ﴿٢١﴾

Have they, then, never travelled through the land and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before them? Greater were they in power than they are, and in the impact which they left on earth. God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God. (21)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَانَت تَّأْتِيهِمْ رُسُلُهُم
بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ فَكَفَرُوا۟ فَأَخَذَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ
قَوِىٌّ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ ﴿٢٢﴾

That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is Powerful, Stern in retribution. (22)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مُوسَىٰ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا
وَسُلْطَٰنٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢٣﴾

We sent Moses with Our signs and a clear authority (23)

إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ وَهَٰمَٰنَ وَقَٰرُونَ
فَقَالُوا۟ سَٰحِرٌ كَذَّابٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

to Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah, but they said: 'A sorcerer, a teller of lies.' (24)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُم بِٱلْحَقِّ مِنْ عِندِنَا قَالُوا۟
ٱقْتُلُوٓا۟ أَبْنَآءَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ مَعَهُۥ
وَٱسْتَحْيُوا۟ نِسَآءَهُمْ ۚ وَمَا كَيْدُ
ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ إِلَّا فِى ضَلَٰلٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

When he came to them, setting forth the truth from Us, they said: 'Kill the sons of those who share his faith, and spare only their women.' Yet the schemes of the unbelievers can only go wrong. (25)

وَقَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ ذَرُونِىٓ أَقْتُلْ
مُوسَىٰ وَلْيَدْعُ رَبَّهُۥٓ ۖ إِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ أَن
يُبَدِّلَ دِينَكُمْ أَوْ أَن يُظْهِرَ
فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ٱلْفَسَادَ ﴿٢٦﴾

Pharaoh said: 'Leave it to me to kill Moses, and let him invoke his Lord! I fear that he will change your religion and cause corruption to spread in the land.' (26)

وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰٓ إِنِّى عُذْتُ بِرَبِّى
وَرَبِّكُم مِّن كُلِّ مُتَكَبِّرٍ
لَّا يُؤْمِنُ بِيَوْمِ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿٢٧﴾

Moses said: 'I seek refuge with Him who is my Lord and your Lord from everyone who is too arrogant and will not believe in the Day of Reckoning.' (27)

وَقَالَ رَجُلٌ مُّؤْمِنٌ مِّنْ ءَالِ فِرْعَوْنَ
يَكْتُمُ إِيمَٰنَهُۥٓ أَتَقْتُلُونَ رَجُلًا أَن
يَقُولَ رَبِّىَ ٱللَّهُ وَقَدْ جَآءَكُم
بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ مِن رَّبِّكُمْ ۖ وَإِن يَكُ
كَٰذِبًا فَعَلَيْهِ كَذِبُهُۥ ۖ وَإِن يَكُ
صَادِقًا يُصِبْكُم بَعْضُ ٱلَّذِى
يَعِدُكُمْ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِى مَنْ هُوَ
مُسْرِفٌ كَذَّابٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

A believing man of Pharaoh's family, who until then had concealed his faith, said: 'Would you kill a man because he says, "God is my Lord," when he has brought you all evidence of the truth from your Lord? If he is a liar, his lie will fall back on him; but if he is speaking the truth, something of what he warns you against is bound to befall you. God will not grace with His guidance anyone who is a lying transgressor. (28)

يَٰقَوْمِ لَكُمُ ٱلْمُلْكُ ٱلْيَوْمَ ظَٰهِرِينَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَمَن يَنصُرُنَا مِنۢ بَأْسِ ٱللَّهِ إِن جَآءَنَا ۚ قَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ مَآ أُرِيكُمْ إِلَّا مَآ أَرَىٰ وَمَآ أَهْدِيكُمْ إِلَّا سَبِيلَ ٱلرَّشَادِ ﴿٢٩﴾

'My people! Yours is the dominion today, having the upper hand in the land; but who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us?' Pharaoh said: 'I am only putting before you what I see myself; and I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.' (29)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِىٓ ءَامَنَ يَٰقَوْمِ إِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ عَلَيْكُم مِّثْلَ يَوْمِ ٱلْأَحْزَابِ ﴿٣٠﴾

Then said the man who believed: 'My people! I fear for you the like of what one day befell earlier communities; (30)

مِثْلَ دَأْبِ قَوْمِ نُوحٍ وَعَادٍ وَثَمُودَ وَٱلَّذِينَ مِنۢ بَعْدِهِمْ ۚ وَمَا ٱللَّهُ يُرِيدُ ظُلْمًا لِّلْعِبَادِ ﴿٣١﴾

the like of what happened to Noah's people, to the 'Ād, and Thamūd and those who came after them. God does not will any injustice for His creatures. (31)

وَيَٰقَوْمِ إِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ عَلَيْكُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلتَّنَادِ ﴿٣٢﴾

'And, my people! I fear for you the Day [of Judgement] when people will call out to one another [in distress]; (32)

يَوْمَ تُوَلُّونَ مُدْبِرِينَ مَا لَكُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ مِنْ عَاصِمٍ ۗ وَمَن يُضْلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ مِنْ هَادٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

the Day when you shall turn back and flee, with no one to defend you against God. He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide. (33)

'Long before this, Joseph came to you with clear evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to cast doubt on the message he brought you. When he died, you said: "God will never send any messenger after him." In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt. (34)

وَلَقَدْ جَآءَكُمْ يُوسُفُ مِن قَبْلُ
بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ فَمَا زِلْتُمْ فِى شَكٍّ مِّمَّا جَآءَكُم
بِهِۦ ۖ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا هَلَكَ قُلْتُمْ لَن يَبْعَثَ
ٱللَّهُ مِنۢ بَعْدِهِۦ رَسُولًا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُضِلُّ
ٱللَّهُ مَنْ هُوَ مُسْرِفٌ مُّرْتَابٌ ﴿٣٤﴾

'Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant.' (35)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ
سُلْطَٰنٍ أَتَىٰهُمْ ۖ كَبُرَ مَقْتًا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ
وَعِندَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يَطْبَعُ ٱللَّهُ
عَلَىٰ كُلِّ قَلْبِ مُتَكَبِّرٍ جَبَّارٍ ﴿٣٥﴾

Pharaoh said: 'Hāmān! Build me a lofty tower that I may attain the right means; (36)

وَقَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ يَٰهَٰمَٰنُ ٱبْنِ لِى صَرْحًا
لَّعَلِّىٓ أَبْلُغُ ٱلْأَسْبَٰبَ ﴿٣٦﴾

the means of approach to the heavens, so that I may have a look at this god of Moses. I am convinced that he is lying.' Thus, goodly seemed to Pharaoh the evil of his deed, and he was barred from the right path. Pharaoh's scheming led only to ruin. (37)

أَسْبَٰبَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ فَأَطَّلِعَ إِلَىٰٓ إِلَٰهِ
مُوسَىٰ وَإِنِّى لَأَظُنُّهُۥ كَٰذِبًا ۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ
زُيِّنَ لِفِرْعَوْنَ سُوٓءُ عَمَلِهِۦ وَصُدَّ عَنِ
ٱلسَّبِيلِ ۚ وَمَا كَيْدُ فِرْعَوْنَ
إِلَّا فِى تَبَابٍ ﴿٣٧﴾

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِىٓ ءَامَنَ يَٰقَوْمِ ٱتَّبِعُونِ
أَهْدِكُمْ سَبِيلَ ٱلرَّشَادِ ﴿٣٨﴾

The man who believed said: 'My people! Follow me: I shall guide you to the path of rectitude. (38)

يَٰقَوْمِ إِنَّمَا هَٰذِهِ ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا مَتَٰعٌ
وَإِنَّ ٱلْءَاخِرَةَ هِىَ دَارُ ٱلْقَرَارِ ﴿٣٩﴾

'My people! This worldly life is but a brief enjoyment, whereas the life to come is the lasting home. (39)

مَنْ عَمِلَ سَيِّئَةً فَلَا يُجْزَىٰٓ
إِلَّا مِثْلَهَا ۖ وَمَنْ عَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا
مِّن ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ
فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ ٱلْجَنَّةَ يُرْزَقُونَ
فِيهَا بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

'Anyone who does a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone, be it man or woman, who does righteous deeds and is a believer will enter paradise where they will receive blessings beyond reckoning. (40)

وَيَٰقَوْمِ مَا لِىٓ أَدْعُوكُمْ إِلَى ٱلنَّجَوٰةِ
وَتَدْعُونَنِىٓ إِلَى ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٤١﴾

'My people! How is it that I call you to salvation, while you call me to the fire? (41)

تَدْعُونَنِى لِأَكْفُرَ بِٱللَّهِ وَأُشْرِكَ
بِهِۦ مَا لَيْسَ لِى بِهِۦ عِلْمٌ وَأَنَا۠ أَدْعُوكُمْ
إِلَى ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْغَفَّٰرِ ﴿٤٢﴾

'You call upon me to deny God and to associate with Him others of whom I have no knowledge, the while I call you to the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. (42)

لَا جَرَمَ أَنَّمَا تَدْعُونَنِىٓ إِلَيْهِ لَيْسَ لَهُۥ
دَعْوَةٌ فِى ٱلدُّنْيَا وَلَا فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ
وَأَنَّ مَرَدَّنَآ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَأَنَّ ٱلْمُسْرِفِينَ
هُمْ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٤٣﴾

'There is no doubt that what you call me to is not fit to be invoked either in this world or in the life to come. To God is our return, when the transgressors shall find themselves in the fire. (43)

فَسَتَذْكُرُونَ مَآ أَقُولُ لَكُمْ ۚ وَأُفَوِّضُ أَمْرِىٓ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بَصِيرٌۢ بِٱلْعِبَادِ ﴿٤٤﴾

'You shall then remember what I am telling you now. As for me, I commit myself to God: God is well aware of all His servants.' (44)

فَوَقَىٰهُ ٱللَّهُ سَيِّـَٔاتِ مَا مَكَرُوا۟ ۖ وَحَاقَ بِـَٔالِ فِرْعَوْنَ سُوٓءُ ٱلْعَذَابِ ﴿٤٥﴾

God delivered him from the evils of their scheming, whereas grievous suffering was to encompass Pharaoh's folk: (45)

ٱلنَّارُ يُعْرَضُونَ عَلَيْهَا غُدُوًّا وَعَشِيًّا ۚ وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ ٱلسَّاعَةُ أَدْخِلُوٓا۟ ءَالَ فِرْعَوْنَ أَشَدَّ ٱلْعَذَابِ ﴿٤٦﴾

before the fire they are brought, morning and evening, and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: 'Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.' (46)

وَإِذْ يَتَحَآجُّونَ فِى ٱلنَّارِ فَيَقُولُ ٱلضُّعَفَٰٓؤُا۟ لِلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَكْبَرُوٓا۟ إِنَّا كُنَّا لَكُمْ تَبَعًا فَهَلْ أَنتُم مُّغْنُونَ عَنَّا نَصِيبًا مِّنَ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٤٧﴾

They will contend with one another in the fire: the weak will say to those who were arrogant, 'We have been your followers, so can you relieve us of some share of the fire?' (47)

قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَكْبَرُوٓا۟ إِنَّا كُلٌّ فِيهَآ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَدْ حَكَمَ بَيْنَ ٱلْعِبَادِ ﴿٤٨﴾

The arrogant will reply: 'We are all in it together. For God has judged between His creatures.' (48)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ فِى ٱلنَّارِ لِخَزَنَةِ جَهَنَّمَ ٱدْعُوا۟ رَبَّكُمْ يُخَفِّفْ عَنَّا يَوْمًا مِّنَ ٱلْعَذَابِ ﴿٤٩﴾

Those in the fire will say to the keepers of hell: 'Pray to your Lord that He lighten this suffering of ours, though it be for one day only.' (49)

قَالُوٓا۟ أَوَلَمْ تَكُ تَأْتِيكُمْ رُسُلُكُم
بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ ۖ قَالُوا۟ بَلَىٰ ۚ قَالُوا۟ فَٱدْعُوا۟ ۗ
وَمَا دُعَٰٓؤُا۟ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ إِلَّا فِى
ضَلَٰلٍ ﴿٥٠﴾

They will ask: 'Did your messengers not come to you with clear evidence of the truth?' They will say: 'Yes, indeed.' [The keepers of hell] will say: 'Pray, then!' But the prayers of the unbelievers will be all in vain. (50)

إِنَّا لَنَنصُرُ رُسُلَنَا وَٱلَّذِينَ
ءَامَنُوا۟ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَيَوْمَ
يَقُومُ ٱلْأَشْهَٰدُ ﴿٥١﴾

We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. (51)

يَوْمَ لَا يَنفَعُ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ مَعْذِرَتُهُمْ ۖ وَلَهُمُ
ٱللَّعْنَةُ وَلَهُمْ سُوٓءُ ٱلدَّارِ ﴿٥٢﴾

On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes. (52)

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَى ٱلْهُدَىٰ وَأَوْرَثْنَا
بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ ﴿٥٣﴾

And indeed, We bestowed Our guidance on Moses, and passed down the Book to the Children of Israel (53)

هُدًى وَذِكْرَىٰ لِأُو۟لِى ٱلْأَلْبَٰبِ ﴿٥٤﴾

as a guide and a reminder to people of understanding. (54)

فَٱصْبِرْ إِنَّ وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَٱسْتَغْفِرْ
لِذَنۢبِكَ وَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ بِٱلْعَشِىِّ
وَٱلْإِبْكَٰرِ ﴿٥٥﴾

Therefore, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning. (55)

Overview

We outlined in the Prologue the theme discussed in this part of the *sūrah*. Before we discuss it in detail, we should observe that this episode from Moses' life story is closely intertwined with the main theme of the *sūrah*, and uses the same style even to the extent of employing the same phrases and expressions. The man from Pharaoh's household who concealed the fact that he was a believer following the true faith presents a number of ideas that have already been mentioned in the *sūrah*. He reminds Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah that they were enjoying a life of comfort and authority, warning them against a fate similar to that which befell earlier communities and couples this with a warning against what may happen to them on the Day of Resurrection. He also refers to those who dispute God's revelations and how God loathes them, as do the believers; a fact also already mentioned in the *sūrah*'s first part. The *sūrah* then portrays their condition in hell, where they are humiliated, praying hard but without any response. A similar image was also given earlier. All this suggests that the logic of faith is the same across all generations, and all believers in all communities use the same arguments. This is only to be expected because the logic and the arguments are derived from the same truth. The *sūrah*, thus, carries the same ambience throughout, giving it its consistent and unique personality. Such uniqueness applies to each and every *sūrah* in the Qur'ān.

Citing an Historical Example

> *Have they, then, never travelled through the land and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before them? Greater were they in power than they are, and in the impact which they left on earth. God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God. That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is Powerful, Stern in retribution.* (Verses 21–22)

These two verses provide a bridge between what has already been discussed in the *sūrah* and the story of Moses. It serves as a reminder to

the Arabs, highlighting the lessons of history and directing them to go about in the land and reflect on the fate of those communities which in former times adopted the same attitude the Arabs showed towards the Prophet Muḥammad and his message. It states that those communities commanded superior strength and left their mark on the land. Yet their weakness was all too clear when they faced God's might. Their sins isolated them from the source of true strength and rallied against them the forces of faith, supported by God's power: "*God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God.*" (Verse 21) There is, in fact, no protection for anyone other than what is provided by faith and good action. To deny the Divine message and reject God's messengers and the clear evidence of the truth they provide will inevitably lead to ruin: "*That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is Powerful, Stern in retribution.*" (Verse 22)

This general reference to earlier communities of unbelievers is followed by an example of such people whom God smote as a result of their sins. The example is provided by Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah, together with other arrogant and tyrannical forces.

This episode from Moses' life story may be divided into sections variously outlining attitudes and depicting scenes. It begins by presenting the message to Pharaoh and his notables, but finishes in the hereafter, when they argue as they suffer the punishment of hell. It is a very long journey, but the *sūrah* highlights certain scenes from it to drive home the idea.

"*We sent Moses with Our signs and a clear authority to Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah, but they said: A sorcerer, a teller of lies.*" (Verses 23–24) This is the attitude adopted in the first encounter: Moses, equipped with the signs given to him by God, is held in awe by all around him due to the fact that he spoke the word of truth. On the other side, however, stood Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah with their falsehood and apparent might, guarding their positions which they felt to be threatened by this power of truth. Therefore, they resort to false argument, seeking thus to defeat the truth: "*They said: A sorcerer, a teller of lies.*" (Verse 24)

The Argument of Brute Force

The *sūrah* does not dwell on what happened after this first encounter, omitting the match with the sorcerers when Moses' staff swallowed their trickery and forced them to declare their acceptance of triumphant truth. Instead, it goes on to the situation that prevailed after these initial events: "*When he came to them, setting forth the truth from Us, they said: 'Kill the sons of those who share his faith, and spare only their women.'*" (Verse 25) A comment on this attitude is given straight away, before the verse is even finished: "*Yet the schemes of the unbelievers can only go wrong.*" (Verse 25)

Whenever tyranny is faced with a clear argument it cannot refute, it resorts to such tactics. It dreads that truth should prevail with its clear and strong arguments that appeal directly to sound human nature. Pharaoh witnessed how his sorcerers, whom he marshalled in the hope that they would defeat Moses, were the first to respond to the truth, immediately declaring themselves as believers. By contrast, Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah said: "*Kill the sons of those who share his faith, and spare only their women.*" (Verse 25)

At the time Moses was born, Pharaoh had issued a similar decree. What we now need to consider is whether the Pharaoh who issued that decree had died and been succeeded by his son or crown prince. Furthermore, whether under this new Pharaoh, the original decree had been stopped, until Moses came back and confronted him with his message. Moses was after all known to this Pharaoh when he was a crown prince, and was aware that Moses had been brought up in the palace. He was also aware of the original decree to slay the male children of the Israelites and to spare their females. Now, his courtiers refer to this decree, advising Pharaoh to apply it in particular to those who believed with Moses, be they the sorcerers or the minority of Israelites who accepted Moses' message despite fearing Pharaoh and his forces. It is also possible that the original Pharaoh who adopted Moses was still in power, but the implementation of his decree had slackened with time or had even been suspended altogether. Now his courtiers advise him to revive it, applying it only to those who followed Moses, so that it would scare people away from Moses, the prophet.

Pharaoh himself seems to take a different point of view, or to have an additional measure which he mentioned during consultations on what tactics he would employ against Moses and his message. Essentially, he wanted to do away with Moses and rid himself of the whole problem:

> *Pharaoh said: Leave it to me to kill Moses, and let him invoke his Lord! I fear that he will change your religion and cause corruption to spread in the land.* (Verse 26)

His words, '*leave it to me to kill Moses,*' suggest that his view was not immediately accepted. Reservations might have been expressed, such as someone suggesting that killing Moses would not end the problem. On the contrary, it might inspire the masses to consider him a hero or a martyr, which could in turn generate enthusiasm towards him and his new faith, particularly after the sorcerers, who were supposed to expose his myth, declared their acceptance of his faith. One or other of Pharaoh's advisers might also have feared that Moses' God might avenge his killing and inflict punishment on his killers. This was a distinct possibility since idolaters believed in multiple deities and could imagine that Moses had a God who would punish his killers. This possibility explains Pharaoh's statement, '*let him invoke his Lord!*' Pharaoh might have meant this as a rejoinder to the objection. On the other hand, his wild remark might have merely been to show that he did not care about the consequences. His carelessness was suitably punished in the end, as we shall presently learn.

It is useful to reflect a little on Pharaoh's argument in support of his declared intention to kill Moses: "*I fear that he will change your religion and cause corruption to spread in the land.*" (Verse 26) Could there be anything more laughable than Pharaoh, the idolater, saying this of Moses, God's messenger? Yet, is it not the same statement every tyrant repeats about everyone who advocates the truth and seeks to reform people's beliefs? Is it not the word of ugly falsehood about splendid truth? What trickery seeking to shake people's faith! It is indeed the same logic repeated whenever falsehood is confronted by the truth, tyranny by justice and unfaith by faith, anywhere in the world.

For his part, Moses resorted to the secure shelter that is always extended to advocates of the truth: "*Moses said: I seek refuge with Him who is my Lord and your Lord from everyone who is too arrogant and will not believe in the Day of Reckoning.*" (Verse 27) As he said this, Moses felt reassured. He submitted himself to the One who overpowers every arrogant despot and is able to protect those who seek His shelter against arrogant enemies. He referred to God's oneness, stating it clearly, fearing nothing of the threats he received. He also referred to the rejection of the true promise that a day will inevitably come when people will have to account for their deeds. No one can resort to arrogance if they believe in the Day of Reckoning. How can they if they realize that they will stand in front of their Lord, humble, deprived of all power, without friend or intercessor?

In Defence of Moses

At this point, a man from Pharaoh's own household who had accepted the truth but kept his faith secret begins his argument in defence of Moses. In his address to Pharaoh and his courtiers, the man tries to touch their hearts with his advice and makes very convincing arguments that combine facts with the prospect of dreadful consequences.

> *A believing man of Pharaoh's family, who until then had concealed his faith, said: Would you kill a man because he says, 'God is my Lord,' when he has brought you all evidence of the truth from your Lord? If he is a liar, his lie will fall back on him; but if he is speaking the truth, something of what he warns you against is bound to befall you. God will not grace with His guidance anyone who is a lying transgressor. My people! Yours is the dominion today, having the upper hand in the land; but who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us? Pharaoh said: 'I am only putting before you what I see myself; and I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.'*
>
> *Then said the man who believed: My people! I fear for you the like of what one day befell earlier communities; the like of what happened to Noah's people, to the 'Ād, and Thamūd and those who*

came after them. God does not will any injustice for His creatures. And, my people! I fear for you the Day [of Judgement] when people will call out to one another [in distress]; the Day when you shall turn back and flee, with no one to defend you against God. He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide. Long before this, Joseph came to you with clear evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to cast doubt on the message he brought you. When he died, you said: 'God will never send any messenger after him.' In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt. Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant. (Verses 28–35)

This is a long, powerful argument advanced by a believer against the conspirators in Pharaoh's court. His argument relies on the sound logic of uncorrupted human nature. It is a skilful argument that combines caution with power. He begins first by describing the enormity of what they propose to do: "*Would you kill a man because he says, 'God is my Lord'*?" (Verse 28) Do such innocent words that imply personal conviction deserve killing the person who says them? Can such words be answered by murder? Shown in this way, your action appears to be gruesome, horrid and repugnant.

He then takes a step forward, saying that this person, Moses, supports his own statement with solid and clear evidence: "*he has brought you all evidence of the truth from your Lord.*" (Verse 28) Here, he is referring to the signs Moses had shown them. They certainly saw these signs, and when they were together, away from the masses, they could not argue about such signs nor their import.

The believer then puts to them the worst possible situation, taking an objective attitude to allow them to reflect on such a scenario: "*If he is a liar, his lie will fall back on him.*" (Verse 28) If he is lying, he will bear the consequences of his lie and suffer his punishment. However, this does not justify killing him. There is, however, the other possibility that what he says is true. It is, then, prudent to be careful and not to expose oneself to its consequences: "*but if he is speaking the truth,*

something of what he warns you against is bound to befall you." (Verse 28) Again this is the least that can be expected in this case. The man did not ask them to consider anything beyond this. His purpose was to make an objective stand, one that provided the most convincing argument.

He then delivers an implicit warning: one that applies to them and to Moses alike: "*God will not grace with His guidance anyone who is a lying transgressor.*" (Verse 28) If this applies to Moses, God will not allow him to escape unscathed. Leave him to God, then, to receive his due punishment. However, you must be careful lest you be the ones who are lying transgressors, because this will mean your inescapable doom.

The believer then gives them a strong warning against incurring God's punishment, reminding them that should it befall them, no power can avert it. Their kingdom and power will then be of little use. They should remember this and be grateful to God for having given them what they enjoyed: "*My people! Yours is the dominion today, having the upper hand in the land; but who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us?*" (Verse 29)

At heart, the man feels what a true believer should feel: God's punishment is closest to those who are in power. Therefore, they are the ones who should be most careful and should try their best to avoid it. It could come upon them at any moment of the night or day, so they must dread such a possibility. The man reminds them of the power and authority they enjoyed, and includes himself among them as he reminds them of God's punishment: "*Who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us?*" (Verse 29) He, thus, shows them that what happens to them is a matter of great concern to him; he is one of them, awaiting the same destiny. Hence, his kind and caring advice. He hopes that they will take this to heart, realizing that it is meant most sincerely, and that they stand no chance against God's punishment should it befall them.

At this point Pharaoh demonstrates the feeling that possesses any tyrant receiving honest advice. He turns in arrogance, perceiving detraction from his authority and encroachment on his dominion: "*Pharaoh said: I am only putting before you what I see myself; and I am*

guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude." (Verse 29) I am only telling you what I know to be true and useful. It is indeed the proper path to follow. Has anyone ever heard of a tyrant who did not feel that what he said was right and full of wisdom? Would any tyrant allow for someone to imagine that he be wrong? Do tyrants allow anyone to uphold a view other than theirs? How else do they become tyrants?

The believer, however, feels that it is his duty to warn and give sound advice, and to express his view lucidly. It is also his duty to stand by the truth, regardless of what tyrants say. He then tries another argument, in the hope that their hearts will soften to it and that they will begin to see the light of the truth. He refers to the fates of earlier communities of unbelievers. They testify to how powerfully God smites arrogant tyrants: "*Then said the man who believed: My people! I fear for you the like of what one day befell earlier communities; the like of what happened to Noah's people, to the 'Ād, and Thamūd and those who came after them. God does not will any injustice for His creatures.*" (Verses 30–31) Each community had its day, but the believer combines them together, making it the day when God's retribution strikes. The nature of these days is the same; hence, they are made to appear as just one day. God wills no injustice on anyone. He only punishes them for their sins, so that those who are close to them and those who come after them may take heed and follow the right course.

The man touches their hearts again, reminding them of another day, the Day of Resurrection, when everyone is calling out: "*And, my people! I fear for you the Day [of Judgement] when people will call out to one another [in distress]; the Day when you shall turn back and flee, with no one to defend you against God. He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide.*" (Verses 32–33)

On that day, the angels responsible for gathering people will be calling out to them; the people standing on the heights will call out, speaking to the people destined for heaven and to the people of hell; the people of heaven and hell will call out addressing each other. Thus, calling out takes place in different ways. Describing it as the 'day of calling out' imparts a feeling of loud clamouring emanating from everywhere, as also a day of overcrowding and dispute. The general air fits well with the believer's words: "*the Day when you shall turn back*

and flee, with no one to defend you against God." They may try to flee when they see hell, but there is no escape. Yet the image of fright and attempting to flee is the first to be shown here of those who considered themselves mighty and who behaved arrogantly, revelling in their earthly power.

"*He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide.*" (Verse 33) Do we see here an implicit reply to Pharaoh's earlier statement when he said: "*I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.*" (Verse 29) This also implies that true guidance comes only from God. Whoever God lets go astray will have no one to guide him. God knows people's conditions and who of them deserves to be guided and who deserves to be left astray.

Finally, the believer reminds them of their attitude to the Prophet Joseph, Moses' ancestor. They also doubted him and his message despite the clear evidence he showed them. They must not adopt the same attitude towards Moses who is confirming what Joseph had brought them earlier. In fact, Moses' message disproves their assertions that God would not send a messenger after Joseph. For, Moses has been sent to prove them wrong: "*Long before this, Joseph came to you with clear evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to cast doubt on the message he brought you. When he died, you said: 'God will never send any messenger after him.' In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt. Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant.*" (Verses 34–35)

This is the only reference in the Qur'ān to Joseph's message addressed to the people of Egypt. In the *sūrah* carrying his name we learn that he was placed in charge of Egypt's storehouses. He also carried the title of 'Azīz, which probably meant the chief minister. There is an indication in the *sūrah* that he sat on Egypt's throne, but this is not confirmed. This may be understood from the verse that says: "*And he raised his parents to the throne, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true.*" (12: 100)

The 'throne' to which Joseph raised his parents might have been something other than Egypt's throne. Be that as it may, Joseph attained a position of power and authority. In light of all this, we can imagine the situation to which the believer in Pharaoh's household was referring: they doubted Joseph's message, but dared not deny it outright when he was the man in power. Then they said: *'God will never send any messenger after him.'* They were practically relieved when he died. Expressing their relief in this way suggests that they did not accept his message based on God's complete oneness. They asserted that God would not send another messenger after him, yet this expressed nothing but their own desire. It is often the case that people desire something and then believe it to be true.

At this juncture, the believer takes a strong stance against such hardened denials of the truth: "*In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt.*" (Verse 34) He warns them that God will abandon those who continue to doubt His message after seeing clear evidence of its truth, letting them go astray. He then tells them plainly that those who continue to dispute God's revelation, without justification or evidence, will be loathed by God and the believers. Pharaoh and his people did this in a very deplorable way. He also condemns arrogance and warns against God's punishment to those who continue to behave arrogantly and resort to high-handedness. "*Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant.*" (Verse 35) These words, from a believer among Pharaoh's household, are almost identical to those at the outset of the *sūrah* speaking of how God dislikes those who dispute His revelations without any proof in support of what they say. The result is that God lets them go astray until there is no room in their hearts for the light of guidance.

Pharaoh's Manoeuvre

Despite such solid arguments from the believer, Pharaoh persisted in his erring ways, adamant in his rejection of the truth. However, he

sought to pretend that he wanted to find out whether what Moses said was true. It appears then that the believer's argument was so convincing and hard-hitting that Pharaoh and his courtiers could not totally ignore it. Therefore, Pharaoh tried to find a way out:

> *Pharaoh said: 'Hāmān! Build me a lofty tower that I may attain the right means; the means of approach to the heavens, so that I may have a look at this god of Moses. I am convinced that he is lying.' Thus, goodly seemed to Pharaoh the evil of his deed, and he was barred from the right path. Pharaoh's scheming led only to ruin.* (Verses 36–37)

Thus, Pharaoh instructed Hāmān, his minister, to build him a very high tower so that he might climb and look into the heavens searching for Moses' God. He also added: '*I am convinced he is lying.*' Pharaoh resorted to this manoeuvring so that he did not have to face the truth which would compel him to acknowledge God's oneness. Such acknowledgement would lose him his throne and dispel the legends upon which his kingdom was based. It is improbable that such was Pharaoh's understanding, or that he seriously wanted to look for Moses' God in this stupid, physical way. In fact, Pharaoh would have attained a high standard of education and knowledge. Therefore, his words really betray his ridicule on the one hand and trickery on the other. He wanted to deceive people into thinking that he was fair-minded, willing to test Moses' claims. Or perhaps this manoeuvre was meant as a retreat in the face of the strong logic advanced by the believer. Whatever is the truth behind his actions, all these possibilities indicate that he persisted in his erring ways, arrogantly denying the truth. "*Thus, goodly seemed to Pharaoh the evil of his deed, and he was barred from the right path.*" (Verse 37) He deserved to be so barred, having chosen to persist with falsehood and deviancy. The *sūrah*'s comment makes clear that such scheming can only lead to failure and utter loss. "*Pharaoh's scheming led only to ruin.*" (Verse 37)

Faced with such thoughtless and devious manoeuvring, the believer makes his final say clear, free of ambiguity. He calls on his people to

follow him in pursuing the right course leading to God. He emphasizes to them that this present life is worthless, while the life to come provides pure bliss. He warns them against the punishment of the hereafter, exposing the hollow and false nature of idolatrous beliefs:

> *The man who believed said: 'My people! Follow me: I shall guide you to the path of rectitude. My people! This worldly life is but a brief enjoyment, whereas the life to come is the lasting home. Anyone who does a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone, be it man or woman, who does righteous deeds and is a believer will enter paradise where they will receive blessings beyond reckoning. My people! How is it that I call you to salvation, while you call me to the fire? You call upon me to deny God and to associate with Him others of whom I have no knowledge, the while I call you to the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. There is no doubt that what you call me to is not fit to be invoked either in this world or in the life to come. To God is our return, when the transgressors shall find themselves in the fire. You shall then remember what I am telling you now. As for me, I commit myself to God: God is well aware of all His servants.* (Verses 38–44)

These are the same facts established at the beginning of the *sūrah*. The believer restates them here as he confronts Pharaoh and his noblemen. He calls on them: "*My people! Follow me: I shall guide you to the path of rectitude.*" (Verse 38) Only a few moments earlier, it was Pharaoh who said: "*I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.*" (Verse 29) This means that the believer was making a clear challenge, stating the word of truth, fearing nothing that the tyrant Pharaoh, or his two ministers, Hāmān and Korah, could do to him. He tells them of the nature of this present life: "*My people! This worldly life is but a brief enjoyment.*" (Verse 39) It cannot continue. It will soon disappear; "*whereas the life to come is the lasting home.*" (Verse 39) It is the one to be preferred.

He states for them the rule that governs reward and punishment in the life to come: "*Anyone who does a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone, be it man or woman, who does*

righteous deeds and is a believer will enter paradise where they will receive blessings beyond reckoning." (Verse 40) It is out of God's grace that good deeds will be rewarded in multiples, while bad ones are requited with no more than what they actually are. God is fully aware of people's weaknesses, the temptations to which they are exposed and the impediments they have to face when they try to adhere to His guidance. Therefore, He multiplies their good deeds and makes them a means to erase their bad ones. If, after the reckoning, they attain admittance into heaven, God grants them there blessings beyond all ken.

The believer expresses his amazement that he should call them to what saves them from punishment, while they call him to what will lead him to the fire: "*My people! How is it that I call you to salvation, while you call me to the fire?*" (Verse 41) Needless to say, they did not call on him to throw himself into a fire, but they called on him to associate partners with God. The two are synonymous. Therefore, he states the other call in the next verse: "*You call upon me to deny God and to associate with Him others of whom I have no knowledge, the while I call you to the Almighty, the All-Forgiving.*" (Verse 42)

The difference between his and their calls cannot be wider. His call is clear, straight, requiring them to believe in God, the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. He calls them to believe in the One God, whose work in the universe testifies to His oneness, limitless ability and infinite power. They should believe in Him so that He will forgive them, as He is the One who forgives all. How does this contrast with what they call him to do? They call him to disbelieve in God, to associate with Him beings of whom he has no knowledge: idols, myths, legends and paradoxes.

The believer then states in all clarity that those alleged partners have no say on any matter in this present world or in the life to come. All shall return to God Almighty when those who transgress the bounds will be the dwellers of fire: "*There is no doubt that what you call me to is not fit to be invoked either in this world or in the life to come. To God is our return, when the transgressors shall find themselves in the fire.*" (Verse 43)

Thus the basic facts of the true faith are laid down, clear, free of all ambiguity. This believer unhesitatingly states them in front of Pharaoh

and his noblemen, although until then he had kept secret the fact that he believed in God. Now he declares his faith openly. What is left for him, then? Nothing other than to surrender himself to God. He has stated the truth as he knew it in the depths of his heart. He warns them that they are certain to remember his words when remembrance will avail them nothing. All matters are referred to God: "*You shall then remember what I am telling you now. As for me, I commit myself to God: God is well aware of all His servants.*" (Verse 44)

The argument is now over, for the believer from among Pharaoh's household has declared the word of truth, which remains clear and valid for the rest of time.

Who Bears the Blame?

The *sūrah* does not dwell on what happened between Moses, Pharaoh and the Children of Israel after this, up to the point of Pharaoh's drowning while Moses and his people were saved. Instead, it affords some glimpses of what happened thereafter, indeed, after life itself:

> *God delivered him from the evils of their scheming, whereas grievous suffering was to encompass Pharaoh's folk: before the fire they are brought, morning and evening, and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: 'Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.' They will contend with one another in the fire: the weak will say to those who were arrogant, 'We have been your followers, so can you relieve us of some share of the fire?' The arrogant will reply: 'We are all in it together. For God has judged between His creatures.' Those in the fire will say to the keepers of hell: 'Pray to your Lord that He lighten this suffering of ours, though it be for one day only.' They will ask: 'Did your messengers not come to you with clear evidence of the truth?' They will say: 'Yes, indeed.' [The keepers of hell] will say: 'Pray, then!' But the prayers of the unbelievers will be all in vain.* (Verses 45–50)

This present world is over, and we see the first event that succeeds it. We see the believer who stated the truth being saved from Pharaoh

and his aides' scheming. They could not cause him any harm in this world, nor after it. By contrast, Pharaoh's folk were engulfed by suffering: "*Before the fire they are brought, morning and evening, and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.*" (Verse 46)

The way this verse is phrased suggests that they are brought before the fire during the time between their death and the Day of Judgement. This may be a reference to the torment suffered in the grave. The statement that follows reads: '*and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.*' This means that this suffering precedes the Day of Judgement. It is a terrible punishment involving exposure to the fire morning and evening, either to make them expect its burning and pain, which is a terrible suffering, or to experience it, which is even worse. Then, on the Day of Judgement, they will be cast into the worst suffering.

The verse that follows tells us of something that happens after resurrection. The unbelievers are shown arguing in hell: "*The weak will say to those who were arrogant, 'We have been your followers, so can you relieve us of some share of the fire?'*" (Verse 47) This means that the weak are together with the arrogant in the fire of hell. The weak have not been spared on account of their weakness, or their being driven like cattle, having no say or choice. God granted them a position of honour, which equipped them to exercise free choice and to be responsible for what they choose. They relinquished all this and followed their arrogant leaders instead. They did not object to anything the leaders said. In fact, it did not occur to them that they could object. They did not think about what their arrogant leaders said to them, or the errors they landed them in: "*We have been your followers.*" The fact of their relinquishing responsibility and what God granted them could never serve as extenuating circumstances in God's sight. Therefore, they will be in hell, driven there by their leaders, just as they used to drive them like sheep in the life of this world. We see them asking their leaders: "*Can you relieve us of some share of the fire?*" (Verse 47) This question is a reminder of what such leaders used to assert, pledging to protect their followers against evil and harm.

Such arrogant leaders, however, are soon fed up with their weak followers requests. Their answer betrays their boredom, but nonetheless they acknowledge what has happened: "*We are all in it together. For God has judged between His creatures.*" (Verse 48)

"*We are all in it together.*" We are all weak, lacking all support and help. We are all alike. So why do you put such a question to us when you realize that the noble and the weaker elements are all the same? "*God has judged between His creatures.*" There can be no review or change to His judgement. The matter is settled. No creature can reduce or amend God's judgement.

When all realize that no refuge can be sought from God's punishment except with Him, they all humbly appeal to the guards of hell, in a way that makes them all equal: "*Those in the fire will say to the keepers of hell: Pray to your Lord that He lighten this suffering of ours, though it be for one day only.*" (Verse 49) They want the guards of hell to intercede on their behalf, hoping that their terrible ordeal can be lifted a little. They ask them to pray to God to reduce their punishment for one day, just to breathe and have a bit of rest. Even a day's reduction is worth such appeals.

The guards of hell, however, do not respond to this humble and passionate appeal. They know their limits, and they are aware of God's law and that the time is long passed. Therefore, they increase the suffering of the dwellers of hell by rebuking them and reminding them of the reasons for their suffering: "*They will ask: 'Did your messengers not come to you with clear evidence of the truth?' They will say: 'Yes, indeed.*'" (Verse 50) The question and its answer suffice. There is no need for any more argument. The guards of hell leave them to their fate, allowing them to sink into despair. "*[The keepers of hell] will say: Pray, then!*" (Verse 50) If any praying will change your situation even a bit, why do you not offer such prayers yourselves? The verse concludes with a comment on such prayers: "*But the prayers of the unbelievers will be all in vain.*" (Verse 50) Such prayer is ignored, remains unanswered. Those who say it are forgotten, be they the leaders or their followers.

God's Unfailing Support

The *sūrah* then adds a comment on the whole episode and what preceded it of reference to the different communities which suffered God's punishment after taking a negative attitude towards His message.

> *We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes. And indeed, We bestowed Our guidance on Moses, and passed down the Book to the Children of Israel as a guide and a reminder to people of understanding. Therefore, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning.* (Verses 51–55)

This definitive comment suits the decisive situation. We have been given an example of the end of truth and falsehood, both in this world and in the life to come. We have seen what fate befell Pharaoh and his noblemen in this life, and we have seen them disputing in hell, utterly humiliated. Such is the end of these communities, as stated in the Qur'ān: "*We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes.*" (Verses 51–52)

As for the life to come, perhaps no believer in life after death will argue about this. They do not find any reason to argue. As for victory in this present world, this may need some explanation.

God's promise is clear and definitive: "*We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and...*" (Verse 51) Yet we see that some messengers were killed, and some had to abandon their homes after being rejected and driven out. Some believers have also been exposed to grievous suffering; some were thrown into the fire pit; some fell martyrs; some live in exceedingly difficult

circumstances. What happens, then, to God's promise of support being given to them in this present life? Satan tries hard to exploit this situation, working hard to shake people's faith.

People, however, use superficial measures when evaluating things, and they overlook many values and facts. They look at a brief period of time and a small area or space. These are limited human measures. A comprehensive look shows the situation to occur in a broad span of time and place. It does not erect limits between one era or place and another. If we look at the question of faith from such a broad perspective, we will see it triumphant, no doubt. Its triumph is the victory of its upholders. They have no existence separate from its existence. The first thing faith requires of them is to dedicate themselves to it completely, so that it is almost as if they disappear while it stays in full vision.

Moreover, people often limit the meaning of victory to a specific outcome they know and can easily recognize. But victory can take different forms, some of which might superficially at least appear akin to defeat. When the Prophet Abraham was thrown in the fire and remained resolute in his determination to stick to his faith and advocate it, was he in a position of victory or defeat? From a faith perspective, he was undoubtedly at the highest point of victory as he was being cast into the fire. He again triumphed when he was saved from the fire. These are two different images that appear to be poles apart, but they are in fact very close to each other. Al-Ḥusayn, the Prophet's grandson, met his martyrdom in a way that is tragic from one angle and splendid from another: so was he victorious or vanquished? On the surface, and judging by immediate considerations, it was a defeat. In reality and from a wider perspective, though, it was a true victory. No other martyr excites sympathy and feelings of support, among both Sunnīs and Shī'ah, like al-Ḥusayn. Indeed, such feelings also apply to many non-Muslims.

Many are the martyrs who achieved for their faith through martyrdom what they could never have achieved in life had they lived a thousand years. They could not impress great meanings on people's minds or motivate them to action like they did with their final sermon,

written with their own blood. Their martyrdom provided motivation for their children and grandchildren, and at times they provided the motivation to change history over several generations.[1]

What constitutes victory? What is meant by defeat? We need to review our concepts and our sense of values before we ask about whether God's promise to His messengers and to believers comes true in this present life?

Yet there are many situations where victory takes its familiar form, particularly when such form is linked to a permanent one. The Prophet Muḥammad achieved victory in his lifetime because his victory was necessary for the establishment of the faith in its full reality in human life. This faith of ours can only be brought to its fullness when it governs the life of its community. It can, thus, conduct all affairs, from those of a single heart and soul to those of state and government. It was God's will that the messenger preaching this faith should triumph during his own lifetime, so that he could establish the full form of the Islamic faith, leaving a real example for future generations. Thus, the familiar form of victory was linked in his case to a much wider one, and the two were united by God's will and according to His planning.

Another point to consider is that God's promise is given to His messengers and to believers. Thus, a prerequisite for victory is the presence of true faith in people's hearts so as to make the promise applicable to them. Yet people often overlook the significance of the truth of faith which comes into existence only when people remove all forms of idolatry. There are some very subtle forms of idolatry which can only be purged when a person is totally devoted to God, relies on Him alone and submits totally to His will in all affairs. He then feels that God guides His footsteps and that He chooses nothing other than what God has chosen for him. Thus, he accepts God's will with contentment. When a person attains this state, he does not suggest to God any particular form of victory. He

1. These words apply to the author himself and his martyrdom. He rejected all tempting offers that sought to make him change his course. His standing in the history of Islamic advocacy was greatly enhanced after his death. Indeed, his books have achieved far wider circulation after his death and have been translated into many languages. – Editor's note.

leaves the matter to God to determine. He accepts whatever befalls him as good. This is one of the meanings of victory. It is victory over one's pleasures and desires. It is an internal victory, one that is prerequisite for achieving the external victory: "*We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes.*" (Verses 51–52)

We have seen in the previous image drawn how the excuses advanced by the wrongdoers were of little use to them, and how they were rejected and made to dwell in the worst of homes. Moses' story shows yet another form of victory: "*And indeed, We bestowed Our guidance on Moses, and passed down the Book to the Children of Israel as a guide and a reminder to people of understanding.*" (Verses 53–54) Providing guidance and passing the book down to them was a form of victory that clearly reflects the breadth of its scope.

The final note in this part of the *sūrah* is given in the form of a directive to the Prophet and the believers facing much hardship in Makkah, and to all future generations of believers who face such hardship: "*Therefore, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning.*" (Verse 55) Remain patient in adversity, whether this adversity takes the form of rejection of the message, denying its truth, or the infliction of physical harm. Remain patient when you are unable to check falsehood that appears to enjoy wealth and power for a period of time. Bear with patience what you have to face of people's rough attitudes and behaviour. Check your own desire to achieve a quick victory. Remain patient as you may have to face many difficulties caused by friends, if not by enemies.

"*Remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true.*" (Verse 55) It may appear slow coming; matters may become complicated; prospects may become gloomy; yet it is the promise of the One who can fulfil it, and whose will it has been to make the promise. As you go along your way, take the necessary equipment: "*Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning.*" (Verse 55) This is what is of most benefit

along the hard way of patience; seeking forgiveness of one's sins and extolling God's praise and glory. While this serves to refine our hearts and feelings, it also ensures a positive response. Indeed, it is through such seeking of forgiveness and extolling of God's praise and glory that victory is achieved within our selves, to be followed by victory in life.

The evening and morning are specified either as a reference to all time, since these are the two ends of the day, or because these are times when hearts are calm and reflective. They can, thus, appreciate God's greatness better.

Such is the way, then, that God has chosen to provide the necessary equipment for achieving victory.

3

Always Responding to Prayers

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِ
ٱللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ سُلْطَٰنٍ أَتَىٰهُمْ إِن فِى
صُدُورِهِمْ إِلَّا كِبْرٌ مَّا هُم
بِبَٰلِغِيهِ ۚ فَٱسْتَعِذْ بِٱللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ
هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْبَصِيرُ ﴿٥٦﴾

As for those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, there is nothing in their hearts but a quest for a greatness they will never attain. Seek, then, refuge with God, for He is the One who hears all and sees all. (56)

لَخَلْقُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ أَكْبَرُ
مِنْ خَلْقِ ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ
ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand. (57)

وَمَا يَسْتَوِى ٱلْأَعْمَىٰ وَٱلْبَصِيرُ
وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ
وَلَا ٱلْمُسِىٓءُ ۚ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor can those who believe and do good works and those who do evil be deemed equal. How seldom you reflect. (58)

إِنَّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ لَءَاتِيَةٌ لَّا رَيْبَ فِيهَا وَلَٰكِنَّ
أَكْثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

The Last Hour is sure to come: of this there is no doubt. Yet most people will not believe. (59)

وَقَالَ رَبُّكُمُ ٱدْعُونِىٓ أَسْتَجِبْ لَكُمْ ۚ
إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبَادَتِى
سَيَدْخُلُونَ جَهَنَّمَ دَاخِرِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

Your Lord says: 'Call on Me, and I shall answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me shall enter hell humiliated.' (60)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلَّيْلَ
لِتَسْكُنُوا۟ فِيهِ وَٱلنَّهَارَ
مُبْصِرًا ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَذُو فَضْلٍ
عَلَى ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ
ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see. God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks. (61)

ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ خَٰلِقُ كُلِّ
شَىْءٍ لَّآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ فَأَنَّىٰ تُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be? (62)

كَذَٰلِكَ يُؤْفَكُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَانُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِ
ٱللَّهِ يَجْحَدُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

Such it is: far deluded are those who knowingly deny God's revelations. (63)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلْأَرْضَ
قَرَارًا وَٱلسَّمَآءَ بِنَآءً وَصَوَّرَكُمْ
فَأَحْسَنَ صُوَرَكُمْ وَرَزَقَكُم مِّنَ
ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتِ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ ۖ
فَتَبَارَكَ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦٤﴾

It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy. He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things. Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (64)

هُوَ ٱلْحَىُّ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَٱدْعُوهُ
مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ ۗ ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ
ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦٥﴾

He is the Ever-Living. There is no deity other than Him. So call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (65)

قُلْ إِنِّى نُهِيتُ أَنْ أَعْبُدَ ٱلَّذِينَ
تَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ لَمَّا جَآءَنِىَ
ٱلْبَيِّنَٰتُ مِن رَّبِّى وَأُمِرْتُ أَنْ
أُسْلِمَ لِرَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦٦﴾

Say: 'Since all evidence of the truth has come to me from my Lord, I am forbidden to worship those whom you invoke instead of God. I am commanded to submit to the Lord of all the worlds.' (66)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَكُم مِّن تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ مِن
نُّطْفَةٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ عَلَقَةٍ ثُمَّ يُخْرِجُكُمْ طِفْلًا
ثُمَّ لِتَبْلُغُوٓا۟ أَشُدَّكُمْ ثُمَّ لِتَكُونُوا۟
شُيُوخًا ۚ وَمِنكُم مَّن يُتَوَفَّىٰ مِن قَبْلُ
وَلِتَبْلُغُوٓا۟ أَجَلًا مُّسَمًّى وَلَعَلَّكُمْ
تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

It is He who creates you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass; and then He brings you forth as infants. He then lets you reach maturity, and then grow old – although some of you die earlier. [All this He ordains] so that you may reach your appointed term, and you may use your reason. (67)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُحْىِۦ وَيُمِيتُ ۖ فَإِذَا قَضَىٰٓ أَمْرًا
فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُۥ كُن فَيَكُونُ ﴿٦٨﴾

It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is. (68)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِ
ٱللَّهِ أَنَّىٰ يُصْرَفُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? (69)

Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers. They will certainly come to know (70)

ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِٱلْكِتَٰبِ وَبِمَآ أَرْسَلْنَا بِهِۦ رُسُلَنَا ۖ فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged (71)

إِذِ ٱلْأَغْلَٰلُ فِىٓ أَعْنَٰقِهِمْ وَٱلسَّلَٰسِلُ يُسْحَبُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell. (72)

فِى ٱلْحَمِيمِ ثُمَّ فِى ٱلنَّارِ يُسْجَرُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

Then they will be asked: 'Where now are those to whom you ascribed divinity (73)

ثُمَّ قِيلَ لَهُمْ أَيْنَ مَا كُنتُمْ تُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

side by side with God?' They will answer: 'They have forsaken us, or rather, what we used to invoke were nothing.' Thus does God let the unbelievers go astray. (74)

مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ قَالُوا۟ ضَلُّوا۟ عَنَّا بَل لَّمْ نَكُن نَّدْعُوا۟ مِن قَبْلُ شَيْـًٔا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُضِلُّ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٧٤﴾

'This is because on earth you took delight in things that are untrue and you were insolent. (75)

ذَٰلِكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَفْرَحُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ ٱلْحَقِّ وَبِمَا كُنتُمْ تَمْرَحُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

'Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.' (76)

ٱدْخُلُوٓا۟ أَبْوَٰبَ جَهَنَّمَ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا ۖ فَبِئْسَ مَثْوَى ٱلْمُتَكَبِّرِينَ ﴿٧٦﴾

فَٱصۡبِرۡ إِنَّ وَعۡدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقّٞۖ فَإِمَّا نُرِيَنَّكَ بَعۡضَ ٱلَّذِي نَعِدُهُمۡ أَوۡ نَتَوَفَّيَنَّكَ فَإِلَيۡنَا يُرۡجَعُونَ ٧٧

Hence, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Whether We show you something of what We hold in store for them or We cause you to die before that, it is to Us that they shall all return. (77)

Overview

This part of the *sūrah* is closely linked to the previous one. It is, in fact, a continuation of the last point in that passage. It further directs the Prophet to remain patient as he faced adversity in the shape of rejection and physical harm. It also directs him to remain patient when the unbelievers used every means to prevent others from accepting the truth and even boasted about falsehood. Having made this directive, the *sūrah* explains the real reason for disputing God's revelations without any sound basis. In short, it is nothing but arrogance and conceit that prevent people from acknowledging the truth. Yet they cannot even attain the status to which, in their arrogance, they aspire.

The *sūrah*, therefore, emphasizes the greatness of the universe created by God, and the smallness of all mankind, compared to the heavens and the earth. In this part, the *sūrah* highlights some of the universal signs and how God, by His grace, has made them subservient to man even though man is much smaller and weaker than them. The *sūrah* also refers to aspects of God's grace within man himself. In all, these aspects confirm the oneness of the Creator.

The Prophet is then directed to proclaim God's oneness and to turn his back on what the unbelievers worshipped beside God. This part then adds a powerful scene of the Day of Resurrection, when the idolaters are rebuked for associating partners with God. The conclusion in this part is the same as in the previous one: a directive to the Prophet to remain patient in adversity, whether God keeps him alive until he has witnessed the realization of some of what He has promised or gathers him to Himself before that. This is something that God determines. All will ultimately return to Him.

Small Fry but Arrogant

> *As for those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, there is nothing in their hearts but a quest for a greatness they will never attain. Seek, then, refuge with God, for He is the One who hears all and sees all. The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand. The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor can those who believe and do good works and those who do evil be deemed equal. How seldom you reflect. The Last Hour is sure to come: of this there is no doubt. Yet most people will not believe. Your Lord says: 'Call on Me, and I shall answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me shall enter hell humiliated.'* (Verses 56–60)

Man often forgets the fact that he is a small, weak creature and that whatever strength he may have does not emanate from within himself, but from his bond with God, the source of all strength and power. He may sever this bond and begin to swell and take on airs. Arrogance, thus, begins to establish itself within him. Satan, who doomed himself as a result of his arrogance, works on man to increase his arrogance knowing that through it he can bring man to ruin.

The unbeliever disputes God's revelations even when they are clear, addressing human nature with the sort of argument that appeals to it. He also claims to himself and others that he is only raising questions because he is not as yet convinced. However, God who knows the inner feelings and secret thoughts of all His creatures makes clear that all this is the result of man's arrogance. It is such arrogance which prompts man to argue and dispute God's revelations over which there can be no dispute. Such arrogance also drives man to aspire to what is beyond his status and what his nature cannot attain. Yet he has no solid basis for such argument for it is rooted deeply in nothing but his own arrogance: "*As for those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, there is nothing in their hearts but a quest for a greatness they will never attain.*" (Verse 56)

If only man would understand the truth about himself and the universe, recognizing his role and not trying to exceed it, appreciating

that he is one of countless creatures each doing their role by God's will and according to His design which He alone knows, he would certainly feel relaxed, humble, living in peace with himself and with the world around him. If he did this, he would easily and readily submit himself to God. He would also do this without any hesitation.

"*Seek, then, refuge with God, for He is the One who hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 56) Seeking refuge with God against arrogance is indicative of how gruesome it is. We seek God's refuge in order to escape what is ghastly, horrible and evil. Arrogance combines all these. Moreover, it is hard for the arrogant person and for those around him. It causes harm to the heart in which it stirs and to other people's hearts. It is an evil we should seek refuge with God from. God hears all and sees all. Arrogance is normally manifested in visible action and audible words. Therefore, it is left to God to decide upon it as He pleases.

Man is then told of his true position in this great universe: how small he is in comparison to some of God's creatures, the great magnitude of which is readily visible and better appreciated on careful examination: "*The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand.*" (Verse 57) The heavens and the earth are there for man to see and to measure himself in relation to them. When he knows the reality of the proportions of distance, dimension, size and power, he reduces his pride, feels his smallness and almost disappears. He can only hold his own when he remembers the superior element God has granted him, and for which He has honoured him. It is this element alone that allows man to stand on his feet in front of the greatness that is the universe.

A quick glance at the universe is sufficient to appreciate all this. The earth on which we live is merely a small satellite of the sun: its mass compared to the mass of the sun is no more than three to a million, while its size is one-millionth of the size of the sun. Yet the sun is only one of around one hundred million suns our galaxy includes. Man now knows that there are around one hundred million such galaxies dispersed in the great expanse of the universe. Still, what we have discovered of the universe is merely a small part; it is so great that we become dazed when we even try to imagine it. The distance between

us and the sun is about 93 million miles. The sun is the head of the family of our planet earth, and most probably the sun is the mother of the earth. Therefore the earth remains close to its mother, standing merely 93 million miles away from it!

The diameter of our galaxy is measured at one hundred billion light years, with one light year measuring 5.8 billion miles, because light travels at the speed of 186,000 miles per second. The closest galaxy to our own is around 750,000 light years away.

We may say again that these distances and dimensions are the best man's little knowledge has determined. Scientists acknowledge that all their discoveries cover only a small part of this great universe.

God says to us: "*The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand.*" (Verse 57) When we speak of God's power and ability, the concepts of greater or smaller, harder or easier do not apply. He creates everything by a single word, 'Be!' The reference here is to how things appear in themselves and how people see and measure them. How does man compare to this great expanse of the universe? How high can his arrogance take him in God's great creation?

"*The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor can those who believe and do good works and those who do evil be deemed equal.*" (Verse 58) The one who is able to see learns and understands, recognizing his station. He does not give himself airs, nor does he allow conceit to distort his judgement. By contrast, a blind person cannot recognize his position in relation to his surroundings. Therefore, he misjudges his position and what is around him. The same applies to those believers who do good works and those who do evil. The first group see things for what they are and form accurate ideas, while the other group misjudges all due to their blind ignorance. They harm themselves and others, and above all they assign to themselves an erroneous position in relation to their environment. They are blind, for true blindness is that of the mind: "*How seldom you reflect.*" (Verse 58) Had we reflected, we would have known. The whole thing is clear, needing only some reflection before it becomes totally apparent.

If only we would remember the hereafter, be certain of its coming, reflect on our position then and recall how we will then stand … "*The*

Last Hour is sure to come: of this there is no doubt. Yet most people will not believe." (Verse 59) Because they do not believe, they argue and give themselves airs; they do not submit to the truth and do not limit themselves to their rightful position.

Addressing our worship to God, praying and appealing to Him, are all means to cure hearts of arrogance, which is the evil that leads people to dispute His revelations and signs without any clear evidence. God opens the door for us to address and pray to Him. He tells us that He has committed Himself to respond to those who pray to Him, warning those who are too proud that they will be made to suffer total humiliation: "*Your Lord says: Call on Me, and I shall answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me shall enter hell humiliated.*" (Verse 60)

Supplication and prayer must observe certain manners. Hearts must be totally dedicated to God, reassured that He will answer our prayer. We must not suggest a particular form or time or circumstance for answering it. To make such a suggestion is improper when appealing to God. We should be clear in our minds that it is a blessing that we address our prayers to God, and that His response is another blessing. 'Umar used to say: "I am not worried about my prayer being answered. I am worried about addressing my prayer. Once I am inspired to pray to God, prayer will be answered." These are the words of someone who has insight, knowing that when God wills to respond to someone's prayer, He also wills that person to pray to Him. The two are concurrent.

Those who are too proud to pray to God and appeal to Him deserve their just reward, which leads them to enter hell in total humiliation. Such is the fitting end of the arrogance that fills some hearts in this small planet and short life, forgetting the greatness of God's creation, let alone His own greatness. It is suitable requital for forgetting the Last Hour, which will inevitably come.

Blessings of All Sorts

The *sūrah* now speaks about certain aspects of God's blessings which testify to His greatness, yet the unbelievers do not offer thanks to

Him for such blessings. On the contrary, they are too proud to address their worship to Him:

> *It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see. God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks. Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be? Such it is: far deluded are those who knowingly deny God's revelations. It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy. He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things. Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds. He is the Ever-Living. There is no deity other than Him. So call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verses 61–65)

The night and day are two universal phenomena, while the earth and the heavens are creatures in the universe. They are all mentioned alongside God's creation of man, who has been given a comely shape, been provided with wholesome sustenance. All these are mentioned within the context of God's oneness and being sincere in our faith in Him. This indicates that all these phenomena, creatures and concepts are interlinked. They should be looked at within their broad environment, noting their mutual interrelations.

The fact that the universe is built on the solid basis God has given it, and its following the course God has assigned to it, allowed life to emerge, evolve and progress on earth. It also allowed human life to take the shape and form familiar to us. It fits with man's needs dictated by his nature and make-up. It has made the night a time for his rest and recuperation, while the day, with its light, a time for movement and action. It has made the earth stable as a field of activity, while the skies are raised like a canopy that does not fall apart. All the necessary proportions are maintained; otherwise, man's existence on earth would have been endangered or impossible. It has allowed wholesome provisions to grow on earth or come down from the sky for man's enjoyment. Moreover, it is God's will that gave man his comely shape and a wealth

of abilities that are in harmony with what is in the universe. All these matters are interlinked, which is the reason for referring to them together in the Qur'ān. Indeed, the Qur'ān makes this interrelation between them evidence of the Creator's oneness. It directs our hearts to call on God, sincere in our devotion, declaring that all praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds. It states that the One who creates all these and establishes such harmony between them is the only one to deserve to be a deity. He is indeed God Almighty, the Lord and Creator of all. How can people be turned away from this truth?

It is perhaps useful here to mention some aspects of the harmony and interrelation evident within the universe and their bearing on man's life.

> If the earth did not rotate facing the sun, there would be no succession of night and day. Had the rotation of the earth been at a higher speed than it actually is, houses would have shattered, and indeed the earth itself would have fallen apart and scattered in space. Had its rotation been slower, mankind would have perished from hot or cold weather. Indeed the current speed of its rotation is the one most suitable for the continuity of plant, animal and human life in its broadest sense. If the earth stopped rotating, all seas and oceans would be without water.[2]

What would happen if the earth's axis became straight and the earth orbited the sun in a circle where the sun would be at the centre? The seasons would be lost and people would not know summer from winter, spring from autumn.[3]

Had the crust of the earth been ten feet thicker, there would be no oxygen, without which animal life is impossible; and had the ocean been a few feet deeper, carbon dioxide and oxygen would have been absorbed and vegetable life on the surface of the land could not exist...

2. Zakī, Aḥmad, *Ma'a Allāh fī al-Samā'* [With God in Heaven]. The author gives no other details about this quotation. I managed to locate a copy of this book, only to discover that this quotation is taken from different pages, with practically every sentence from a different page. The copy I have seen is published by Dār al-Hilāl, Cairo, but it is not dated. Perhaps the author referred to an earlier edition. - Editor's note.

3. Ibid., pp. 88–89.

If the atmosphere had been much thinner, some of the meteors which are now burned in the outer atmosphere by the millions every day would strike all parts of the earth. They travel from six to forty miles a second and would set fire to every burnable object. If they travelled as slowly as a bullet, they would all hit the earth and the consequences would be dire. As for man, the impact of a tiny meteor travelling ninety times as fast as a bullet would tear him in pieces by the heat of its passage.[4]

If, for instance, instead of 21 per cent oxygen [there] were 50 per cent or more of the atmosphere, all combustible substances in the world would become inflammable to such an extent that the first stroke of lightning to hit a tree would ignite the forest, which would almost explode. If it were reduced to 10 per cent or less, life might through the ages have adjusted itself to it, but few of the elements of civilization now so familiar to man, such as fire, would be available.[5]

There are thousands of fine balances in the design of the universe that are necessary for human life. If any of them is disturbed only slightly, human life as we know it would not be possible.

As for man, one of the elements of his perfect shape is his unique form among all living things. His constitution enables his systems to fulfil their functions easily and meticulously. Moreover, the harmony between him and his surroundings is perfect, allowing him to live and act within his environment. All this may be added to his most fundamental and unique quality that enables him to be in charge of planet earth. He is equipped with the tools necessary for the fulfilment of his task, having been given a mind and spiritual contact with what is beyond the physical.

If we were to study the great accuracy of the human constitution and the harmony between the different parts and systems of man's body, relating it to the Qur'ānic statement: "*He has moulded you into a comely shape*", (Verse 64) we would need to reflect at length on every small organ, and indeed on every single cell in this marvellous creature. Take for example man's jaw and how teeth are placed in it:

4. Morrison, A. Cressy, *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, Kingswood, Surrey, 1962, pp. 27 28.
5. Ibid., p. 30.

the jaw is so finely shaped that if the gum or the tongue were to protrude by one tenth of a millimetre this would be enough to make the gum or the tongue unfit within the mouth. A protrusion of similar thickness in a tooth or a molar will bring it into friction with the opposite tooth or molar. Take, for example, something as thin as a cigarette paper which when pressed between the upper and lower jaws is left with marks on it. As the two jaws close they press against any object between them even if its thickness is no more than that of the finest paper.

Man's constitution is equipped to live on this planet. His eyes are made to receive the light frequency which he needs to see. His ears pick up the sound frequencies he needs to hear. Every single organ in his constitution is designed for the environment in which he lives, with a limited ability to adapt to changing conditions. Man is created to live in this particular environment and to have a mutual impact on it. There is a close relationship between him and his environment, i.e. with the earth and the skies. Therefore, the Qur'ān mentions man's shape in the same verse in which it mentions the earth and sky. How fitting!

Let us now briefly discuss the text itself: "*It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see.*" (Verse 61) Rest at night is necessary for every living thing. A period of darkness is needed so that living cells can rest before resuming their activity during the day. Sleeping is not enough to afford the needed rest; darkness is also necessary. A living cell that is exposed to light continuously reaches a degree of fatigue that ruins its structure.

"*And the day to make you see.*" (Verse 61) A literal translation would render this phrase as, 'and the day able to see.' The expression brings the day alive as if it is a living entity that can look at and see things. In fact, it is people that can see during the day, but this quality is given to the day itself because it is almost universal.

The succession of the day and the night in this way is a blessing that involves further blessings. Had one or the other of them stretched permanently, or if it were merely several times as long, life would come to an end. It is fitting, then, that the succession of day and night is often mentioned within the context of God's blessings for which most

people do not give thanks: "*God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks.*" (Verse 61)

These two phenomena are brought into existence by the One who alone deserves to be named God: "*Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be?*" (Verse 62) People do recognize God's hand in everything, and they know for certain that He is the Creator of all. Such knowledge, in fact, forces itself on our minds by the very existence of things. No one can claim to have created these, and it is impossible that they could have come into existence of their own accord. It is most amazing then that people should turn away from believing in God: "*How deluded can you be?*" Yet, this does happen: people turn away from the clear truth, in the same way as some of those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān turned away. This takes place throughout all generations, without reason or evidence: "*Such it is: far deluded are those who knowingly deny God's revelations.*" (Verse 63)

The *sūrah* then mentions the universal design that gives the earth and the sky their respective functions: "*It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy.*" (Verse 64) The earth is a place suited for man's life, considering the many balances operating in it, some of which we have briefly discussed. The sky is a structure with careful proportions, dimensions and cycles to ensure stability and the continuity of human life. Indeed human life is taken into consideration in the design of the universe itself.

Furthermore, the *sūrah* specifies a link between the structure of the heavens and earth on the one hand and man's constitution and the wholesome provisions made for him on the other: "*He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things.*" (Verse 64) These blessings and provisions are followed by a comment similar to the earlier one: "*Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 64) He is the One who creates, measures and designs, giving you a specified place in His kingdom. He is your Lord, so glorify Him. His bounty encompasses all worlds.

"*He is the Ever-Living.*" (Verse 65) His life is from Himself, neither gained nor created, without a beginning or an end. It does not alter,

change or finish. Nothing else has such qualities to its life. All glory to Him; unique is His life.

Again He alone is the Godhead. The One who has a unique life is God: "*There is no deity other than Him.*" Therefore, "*call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him.*" And when you pray to Him, give Him due praise: "*All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 65)

Definitive Declaration

The Prophet is given clear instructions to declare to his people that he has been forbidden to worship what they invoke other than God. He has also been commanded to submit himself to the Lord of all the worlds:

> *Say: Since all evidence of the truth has come to me from my Lord, I am forbidden to worship those whom you invoke instead of God. I am commanded to submit to the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verse 66)

He is to declare to those who turn away from God's revelations and deny His blessings that he has been ordered not to worship the ones they invoke instead of God. He is to tell them that he has acted on this prohibition '*since all evidence of the truth has come to me from my Lord.*' He has the evidence, and he believes in it. It is right that he should then declare the word of truth. The prohibition to worship anyone other than God denotes a negative action, while submission to God Almighty is a positive one. It is from these two opposite parts that faith is brought to its fullness.

Having highlighted certain signs of God in the wide universe, the *sūrah* now highlights a sign from within man himself. It is the miracle of human life and its marvellous stages. This is given here by way of a prelude to stating the true nature of life granted by God:

> *It is He who creates you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass; and then He brings you forth as infants. He then lets you reach maturity, and then grow old – although some of you die earlier. [All this He ordains] so that you may reach your*

appointed term, and you may use your reason. It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is. (Verses 67–68)

This beginning of human life includes facts that man's knowledge could not know because they took place before his existence, and others which man sees and monitors. Yet such monitoring started only recently, centuries after the revelation of the Qur'ān.

That man was created out of dust refers to a fact taking place before his existence. Dust is the origin of all life on earth, including human life. Only God knows how this miracle was accomplished, and how this great event took shape. As for subsequent procreation, this takes place when a male's sperm fertilizes a female's egg. Conception takes place and a cell mass clings to the uterus. At the end, a baby is born after having gone through a number of major development stages. When carefully considered in comparison to what happens after birth, these stages appear to be longer and greater than the stages we go through from birth till death. The *sūrah* mentions some of these latter stages: childhood, full adulthood at around 30, and old age. These stages represent maximum vigour in between two ends characterized by weakness. "*Some of you die earlier*," before attaining to some of these stages. God ordains all this "*so that you may reach your appointed term*", when you die at the specified time, unable to delay it or indeed hasten it. "*And you may use your reason.*" To follow the journey travelled by the foetus and then by a baby and to reflect on what they indicate of elaborate planning requires good use of our reason.

The embryonic journey is truly fascinating. We have come to know much about it with the many recent advancements in medicine and embryology. The Qur'ānic reference to it, so accurate and precise, fourteen centuries earlier, is exceptionally interesting. Any reasonable person is bound to reflect on this fact.

These two journeys, of the embryo and the baby, directly affect our hearts, regardless of our social environment or standard of education. Every generation feels this effect in its own way and according to the information available to it. The Qur'ān addresses these facts to all

generations, and they receive the message contained in them, and then determine their response or lack of it.

This is followed by mentioning the facts of giving life and taking it away, creation and origination: "*It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is.*" (Verse 68) The Qur'ān repeatedly refers to life and death as they are signs that have a strong effect on man's heart. Indeed both phenomena affect everything in man's world. Both have wider scope than initially thought. There are different forms and aspects of both life and death. We need only to think of a dead, barren land, and then we see it quicken, becoming full of life. We see a tree with dry leaves and stripped branches in one season, and we see it later with life bursting through every part of it. It soon blossoms with leaves, flowers and fruit. We can look at an egg, a chic, a seed, a plant, etc. These are all aspects of the journey from death to life. There is also the opposite journey, from life to death. Both can strongly affect us as we contemplate them.

Added to these two phenomena there is the origination. It is sufficient that God's will is directed to the creation of anything through the word, 'Be,' and the subject matter of this comes into existence. Blessed be God, the best of all creators.

A Singular Argument

Against the backdrop of the emergence of human life, the cycle of life and death, the truth of initiation and origination, disputing the truth of God's revelations or the import of His signs sounds singular. Equally odd is any denial of God's messengers. Hence, a fearful warning is given in the form of a scene from the Day of Resurrection:

> *Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers. They will certainly come to know when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell. Then they will be asked: 'Where now are those to whom you ascribed divinity side by side with God?' They will answer: 'They have*

forsaken us, or rather, what we used to invoke were nothing.' Thus does God let the unbelievers go astray. 'This is because on earth you took delight in things that are untrue and you were insolent. Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.' (Verses 69–76)

These verses first wonder at those disputing God's revelations when they see the great signs He has placed in the universe. This serves as a prelude to outlining the fate that awaits them in the life to come. "*Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers.*" (Verses 69–70) They have rejected one book and one messenger, but, in fact, they reject everything all God's messengers said. Theirs is the same faith, put in its most perfect form in the final message. This means that they actually denied every single message and rejected every single messenger. Everyone who opposed the Divine faith, at any time in history including the present, did this when he or she opposed the truth advocated by the messenger addressing him personally.

"*They will certainly come to know.*" (Verse 70) This statement adds humiliation to painful punishment. "*When, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged.*" (Verse 71) They are dragged like animals and beasts to add further humiliation to their predicament. Why should they be given honourable treatment when they have discarded every single cause of honour? Their humiliation and dragging eventually leads them "*into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell.*" (Verse 72) There they are tied up after the place is filled with a burning fire and scalding water.

Such is the end they face. It is then that they are further rebuked and painfully embarrassed: "*Then they will be asked: Where now are those to whom you ascribed divinity side by side with God?*" (Verses 73–74) Their reply is that of someone who is in total sorrow after he realizes that he has been badly deceived: "*They will answer: They have forsaken us, or rather, what we used to invoke were nothing.*" (Verse 74) We have lost them and we have no way of finding them. Nor can they find us. In fact we did not ascribe divinity to anyone. These were all myths and

false presumptions. After this sorrowful answer, the *sūrah* adds a general comment: "*Thus does God let the unbelievers go astray.*" (Verse 74)

A further and final reproach is then added: "*This is because on earth you took delight in things that are untrue and you were insolent. Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.*" (Verses 75–76) God save us! What, then, was all that dragging, the chains, the scalding waters and fire? It appears that these were a prelude before entering hell where they would abide. It was because of their arrogance that they were so humiliated.

Again, the *sūrah* urges the Prophet to remain patient in the face of the many levelled adversity he was encountering, represented in the arrogance shown by the unbelievers and their persistent disputing of God's revelations. He is told to have complete trust in the fulfilment of God's promise, whether God keeps him alive to see with his own eyes some aspects of what He warned the unbelievers against or He gathers him to Himself first. The whole question is determined by God. God's messenger's task is to deliver his message. Ultimately, all will return to God:

> *Hence, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Whether We show you something of what We hold in store for them or We cause you to die before that, it is to Us that they shall all return.* (Verse 77)

There is something that deserves careful attention here. The Prophet Muḥammad, God's messenger, who faced a determined onslaught of rejection, persecution and arrogant hostility is being told in short: 'Fulfil your duty and do not be concerned with anything else. The outcome is none of your concern.' He was not even to entertain wishes that God might act in fulfilment of some aspects of the punishment promised to the arrogant unbelievers. He is simply required to fulfil his responsibility. The whole dispute is not his; it is God's and He determines how He will settle it.

This is a very high standard of discipline which God requires from the advocates of His message, starting with His noble messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him). What is required of them is very

hard indeed. It requires them to keep their strong feelings and wishes in check. Is it for this reason that the command to remain patient is given at this point in the *sūrah*? In this sense, it is not a repeat of the earlier order to be patient. Rather, it points to a different type of patience, which can be harder than handling arrogance and physical harm with patience.

Here we see that ordinary human beings, advocating God's message, are required to purge themselves of the desire to see how God punishes His and their enemies who continue to fight against them. This is extremely difficult. Yet it is part of the cultivation of the ideals of those who serve God's cause. They are to shed everything that they desire for themselves, even though this may be no more than to see the enemies of their faith defeated and punished.

When the advocates of God's faith attain this level, they equip themselves with what saves them from drowning in the ocean of desire. Desires may seem pure and justified to start with, but Satan tries hard to manipulate them for his own ends.

4

When it is Too Late to Believe

We sent other messengers before your time; some We have given you an account of, while others We have not. No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave. When God's will becomes manifest, judgement will be passed between them in all justice, and lost will be, then and there, all who have followed falsehood. (78)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلًا مِّن قَبْلِكَ
مِنْهُم مَّن قَصَصْنَا عَلَيْكَ
وَمِنْهُم مَّن لَّمْ نَقْصُصْ عَلَيْكَ
وَمَا كَانَ لِرَسُولٍ أَن يَأْتِيَ بِآيَةٍ
إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ فَإِذَا جَاءَ أَمْرُ اللَّهِ
قُضِيَ بِالْحَقِّ وَخَسِرَ هُنَالِكَ
الْمُبْطِلُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

It is God who provides livestock for you, some for riding and some for your food. (79)

اللَّهُ الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَنْعَامَ لِتَرْكَبُوا
مِنْهَا وَمِنْهَا تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

You have other benefits in them too. You can reach on them any destination you wish. On them, as on ships, you are carried. (80)

وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَنَافِعُ وَلِتَبْلُغُوا عَلَيْهَا
حَاجَةً فِي صُدُورِكُمْ وَعَلَيْهَا وَعَلَى
الْفُلْكِ تُحْمَلُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

And He shows you His signs: which of God's signs can you still deny? (81)

وَيُرِيكُمْ آيَاتِهِ فَأَيَّ آيَاتِ
اللَّهِ تُنكِرُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَيَنظُرُوا۟
كَيْفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن
قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ كَانُوٓا۟ أَكْثَرَ مِنْهُمْ وَأَشَدَّ
قُوَّةً وَءَاثَارًا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَمَآ أَغْنَىٰ
عَنْهُم مَّا كَانُوا۟ يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

Have they not travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before them? They were more numerous than them, and greater in power and in the impact they left on earth. Yet what they achieved was of no avail to them. (82)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُم بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ
فَرِحُوا۟ بِمَا عِندَهُم مِّنَ ٱلْعِلْمِ
وَحَاقَ بِهِم مَّا كَانُوا۟ بِهِۦ
يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

When God's messengers came to them with all evidence of the truth, they revelled in what knowledge they had; and so they were overwhelmed by the very thing which they mocked. (83)

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْا۟ بَأْسَنَا قَالُوٓا۟ ءَامَنَّا بِٱللَّهِ
وَحْدَهُۥ وَكَفَرْنَا بِمَا كُنَّا بِهِۦ
مُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾

And then when they saw Our might, they said: 'We believe in God alone, and we renounce those we used to associate as partners with Him.' (84)

فَلَمْ يَكُ يَنفَعُهُمْ إِيمَٰنُهُمْ لَمَّا رَأَوْا۟ بَأْسَنَا ۖ
سُنَّتَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّتِى قَدْ خَلَتْ فِى عِبَادِهِۦ ۖ
وَخَسِرَ هُنَالِكَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost. (85)

Overview

This final part of the *sūrah* elaborates on the comments given at the end of the previous part. It again directs the Prophet and the believers to remain patient in adversity, until God wills to bring about what He has promised the believers and what He has warned the unbelievers against. This may take place during the Prophet's lifetime or may be

delayed until a later time. The question here is that of faith, the believers and the rejecters who dispute its truth. The arbiter in all this is God. It is He who determines the course of His message as He pleases.

In this part the *sūrah* outlines some additional aspects of this point. The Divine message has a long history. It did not start with the Prophet Muḥammad and the Islamic message embodied in the Qur'ān. Before him there were many messengers, some of whom God mentioned to the Prophet and some He did not. They all faced rejection and arrogance. They were all required to demonstrate miracles. Everyone of them dearly wished that God would give him a miracle which would force the rejecters to submit to the truth. However, showing such a sign or a miracle is a matter that God determines at His own time. The message is His and He conducts its affairs.

Nevertheless, there are numerous signs in the universe, which can be seen by all at all times. Of these, the *sūrah* mentions here cattle and ships, and refers in general to other signs which no one can deny.

The *sūrah* concludes with a strong reminder of the destruction of earlier communities all of whom displayed similar arrogance. Their power and civilization were of little use to them when God's law was applied: "*But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost.*" (Verse 85) On this powerful note the *sūrah* concludes. It is a *sūrah* that focuses its attention on the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith, tyranny and justice.

Past Messengers

> *We sent other messengers before your time; some We have given you an account of, while others We have not. No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave. When God's will becomes manifest, judgement will be passed between them in all justice, and lost will be, then and there, all who have followed falsehood.* (Verse 78)

This whole question of the message has had many precedents, some of which are told by God to His messenger in this book, the Qur'ān. Others, He chose not to tell him about. The accounts that have been

given clearly show the long, clearly marked way that advocacy of the Divine message should take. They also outline the rules that cannot be altered, since God has set them into operation. Furthermore, these accounts of past messengers make clear the nature of the message, the role of the messengers and the limits they have to observe.

The present verse strongly emphasizes a fact that needs to be fully understood: "*No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave.*" (Verse 78) Every believer, even though he may be a messenger of God, would love to see the Divine message victorious. They dearly wish that those who stubbornly reject it will soon succumb to its truth. Therefore, they would love to see a miracle that would break the stubbornness of hardened unbelievers. However, God wants His chosen servants to remain absolutely patient in the face of all adversity. He, therefore, makes it clear to them that they have no say in the matter; their task is completed when they have delivered their message. Miracles occur at the time of His choice. Thus, they should be reassured, satisfied with whatever is accomplished through them, leaving the final outcome to God, who determines it as He pleases.

God also wants people to understand the nature of Godhead and the nature of prophethood. He wants them to realize that God's messengers are mortals like them: He has chosen them and assigned them their missions. Not only can they not exceed that mission, they would not try to do so. Moreover, people should know that miracles are delayed out of God's mercy. It is God's will that should people continue to reject His faith after they have been given a miracle, He will destroy them soon after that. Thus, they are given time and a period of grace: "*When God's will becomes manifest, judgement will be passed between them in all justice, and lost will be, then and there, all who have followed falsehood.*" (Verse 78) There will be no time left for any further action, nor for repentance or mending of ways.

Signs Everywhere

Those who demand miracles are directed to reflect on God's signs that are present everywhere in the world around them. Because of the long familiarity of these, they are often forgotten. Reflection on them, however, is sufficient to give them all the evidence they want. They

testify to the fact that God is the Creator of everything in the universe. No one can claim that these have been created by anyone other than God; nor can there be any claim that they existed without being created by God who has planned everything:

> *It is God who provides livestock for you, some for riding and some for your food. You have other benefits in them too. You can reach on them any destination you wish. On them, as on ships, you are carried. And He shows you His signs: which of God's signs can you still deny?* (Verses 79–81)

The creation of livestock is a miracle in the first place, just like the creation of man. To shape and fashion them and to give them life are all miracles which human beings do not even claim. Another miracle is making such livestock subservient to man, when some of them are larger and stronger than man. Yet, "*It is God who provides livestock for you, some for riding and some for your food.*" (Verse 79) To say that such livestock merely exist and we need not concern ourselves with how or why they do is unacceptable. To claim that they are not a clear miracle in relation to man and his ability, or that they do not point to the Creator who originated them and gave them their characteristics, as He did with man, is to make arbitrary claims that run against logic and reason.

The *sūrah* reminds them of the favours God has granted them through these creatures: "*some for riding and some for your food. You have other benefits in them too. You can reach on them any destination you wish. On them, as on ships, you are carried.*" (Verses 79–80) The things that they used to desire and accomplish through travelling on such mounts were great at the time; this before the invention of modern means of travel and transport. There are still certain things that continue to be done by using such livestock. Even today, certain mountainous areas can only be reached by using animals, despite the fact that cars, trains, planes and other vehicles are available to us. Access to them is through narrow passages that can only be traversed by animals.

"*On them, as on ships, you are carried.*" (Verse 80) This is also a sign from God; indeed, a great blessing from Him. The fact that ships sail on the sea is based on a number of natural laws and balances that are of the essence of the universe's design. They involve the earth, sky, dry

land, sea and river, as well as the nature of the elements and components of the universe. These are essential whether a boat uses sail, steam, combustion engine, nuclear power, or some other power God has placed on our planet and the use of which He has facilitated for man. Hence, ships are mentioned here as an aspect of God's signs on the one hand and the blessings He bestows on man on the other.

God's signs throughout the universe are countless. They cannot be denied by any serious minded person: "*And He shows you His signs: which of God's signs can you still deny?*" (Verse 81) Yes, indeed! Some people do deny and dispute God's revelations and signs, using false arguments to try to undermine the truth. Such people, however, are motivated only by ulterior motives, arrogance, twisted concepts or some purpose other than establishing the truth. A tyrant like Pharaoh, who feared for his throne because he knew that the truth of God's oneness would disprove the legends on which his kingship was based, disputed God's signs and His message. Some people believe in certain creeds that are incompatible with the principle of God's oneness such as communism. Communists wanted people to confine themselves to the earth, concentrating all their cares on their bellies and sexual desires. They wanted people to worship nothing other than the creed or the leader. Others suffered under the yoke of the clergy, as happened during the Middle Ages in Europe when the Church held excessive powers, and people wanted to get rid of such tyranny. Therefore, they rejected God in whose name the Church exercized its tyranny.

There are other motives that make people dispute the truth of faith. However, human nature finds such disputes repugnant and acknowledges the truth testified by everything in the universe.

Lessons of History

The *sūrah* concludes on a very powerful note:

> *Have they not travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before them? They were more numerous than them, and greater in power and in the impact they left on earth. Yet what they achieved was of no avail to them. When God's messengers came to them with all evidence of the truth, they revelled*

in what knowledge they had; and so they were overwhelmed by the very thing which they mocked. And then when they saw Our might, they said: 'We believe in God alone, and we renounce those we used to associate as partners with Him. But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost. (Verses 82–85)

Many communities were destroyed during human history. What happened to some of these communities can be seen in their ruins; others are recorded in history, written or transmitted by word of mouth. The Qur'ān often directs our attention to these histories because they are indicative of human life and its course of history. They also have a powerful effect on our minds and hearts. The Qur'ān addresses human nature by what God, who revealed the Qur'ān, knows of human nature: what influences it and what opens its receptors. Some of these receptors need only a light tap, while others require strong hammering because of the thick veils that have covered them over time.

At this point the *sūrah* questions them, encouraging them to travel across the land with open eyes, alert feelings and an objective approach. They should look at what took place on earth before their time, and consider whether they too might be exposed to the same: "*Have they not travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before them?*" (Verse 82) Before specifying what end they met, the *sūrah* describes the conditions of those past communities so that the addressees can consider how it could affect them and also enable them to draw the right lessons: "*They were more numerous than them, and greater in power and in the impact they left on earth.*" (Verse 82) Thus, they enjoyed power and civilization. Some of these belonged to generations that preceded the Arabs, the history of some is given to the Prophet, while others were known to the Arabs who passed by their ruins: "*Yet what they achieved was of no avail to them.*" (Verse 82)

Neither material power nor numerical strength was of any avail to them. Indeed their advancement was the cause of their tragedy: "*When God's messengers came to them with all evidence of the truth, they revelled in what knowledge they had.*" (Verse 83) Without faith, knowledge becomes a test that may cause blindness and excess. Such superficial

knowledge can lead to conceit and arrogance. Given such knowledge, a person may think that he can control immense powers and immeasurable resources and this leads him to transgress beyond his limits. He tends to forget the great many things he does not know. These are present in the universe, but he has no power over them. Indeed, he is not fully aware of them. He only knows their ends that are close to him. Yet he boasts falsely, emphasizing his knowledge and overlooking his ignorance. If he would only compare what he knows to what he does not, and what he is able to do to with what he cannot even begin to understand, he would certainly moderate his excitement about his knowledge.

Those people, however, revelled in what little knowledge they had and ridiculed whoever reminded them of what is beyond their knowledge: "*And so they were overwhelmed by the very thing which they mocked.*" (Verse 83) Therefore, when they see God's might, they begin to realize the truth of their arrogance and acknowledge what they used to deny. They declare their belief in God's oneness and disown those deities which they alleged to be God's partners. All this, however, comes when it is too late: "*And then when they saw Our might, they said: 'We believe in God alone, and we renounce those we used to associate as partners with Him. But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all.*" (Verses 84–85) It is a rule God has established that repentance after demonstrating God's might is not acceptable, because it is motivated by fear, not by faith. "*This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures.*" (Verse 85) God's way remains operative at all times. It never changes, deviates or fails: "*There and then the unbelievers will be lost.*" (Verse 85)

This is a very powerful conclusion to the *sūrah*, with God's might overwhelming the rejecters when they are raising their voices with appeals motivated by fear. Thus, the end fits well with overall ambience and main subject matter of the *sūrah*.

The *sūrah* tackles those issues of faith that feature prominently in Makkan revelations, such as God's oneness, resurrection and revelation. These, however, are not the main themes of the *sūrah*. Its main theme is the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith, tyranny and justice. Indeed, the development of this battle gives the *sūrah* its distinctive features.